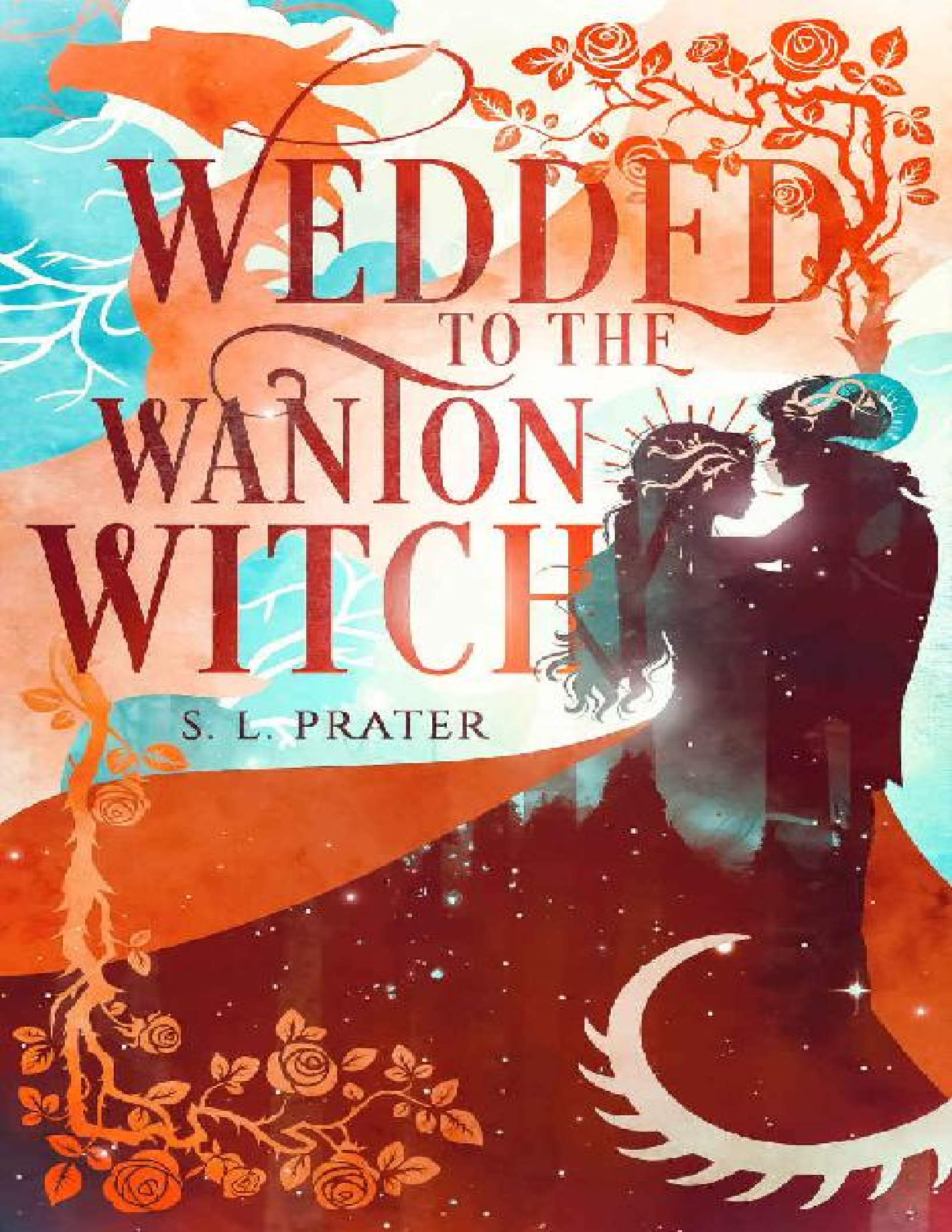




WEDDED TO THE WANTON WITCH

S. L. PRATER

S. L. PRATER

Wedded to the Wanton Witch

Copyright © 2023 by S. L. Prater

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

S. L. Prater asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Edited by Erin Grey. Cover designed by Saint Jupiter.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com

Contents

[Dear Reader](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Dear Reader

This kissing book was written for an adult audience. Romance is the plot. If you're hoping for sword fights and dragon slaying, please note that this is a cozy, low-stakes fantasy containing copious amounts of banter, some foul language, and on-page steam between consenting characters. If fluffy romantic fun is not for you, please take care of yourself.

Chapter 1



Jonas

Jonas was in trouble. He knew it the moment Lady Frances entered the meeting hall armed with her overstuffed carpet bag, wearing a tight bodice that accentuated her abundant assets. He normally enjoyed the company of beautiful women. Unfortunately, it was difficult to admire pouty lips and tempting breasts when they belonged to someone as vexing as Lady Frances Aaberg—a witch who greatly enjoyed shouting at him.

The foyer of the matchmaker's hall was decorated in mirrors. He used the largest looking-glass to keep a discreet eye on the lady from the threshold of the dining room. After she exchanged polite pleasantries with the human servants, she was promptly escorted into a parlor by a footman to await a summons.

The matchmaker bustled in beside Jonas then, a Seelie woman with a shock of white hair, long pointed ears, and a no-nonsense attitude that he appreciated. She'd selected several very promising candidates for him to wed already. None of them had been particularly invigorating in terms of company, but just about any one of them would get the job done if he set his mind to it.

Something held him back though. He'd have to share a home and a bed occasionally with his bride. It need not be a love match, but he'd rather he

wasn't bored to tears in her presence.

Jonas needed to make a selection soon if he wanted to be considered by the best clubs before they opened to new members next year. Though a man of vast wealth, there was one thing that barred him from accessing all that the Lunar Court and the riches of the city of River Row had to offer him. He needed a lord's title. The right bride could fix all of that.

But why in heaven's name had Lady Frances been invited here? Jonas frowned down at the matchmaker, suddenly doubting her capabilities. The Seelie were shorter in stature than Lunar fae like himself. Even though he was slouching in the archway, the top of her snowy head barely came to his chest. The Seelie lacked horns and similar adornments, like the short black, bracket-shaped set that curved back off his own crown.

"The Lady of Whiteholm and I don't get on," he explained in a low rumble. Needing to busy his hands, he straightened the lapel of his jacket.

"Lady Aaberg mentioned you knew each other during the acquisitions stage." She spoke in the lilting accent of the northern provinces. Her blue eyes were light, suggesting she was a younger immortal, only a century old perhaps. "The lady mentioned something about a bargain with her father, the earl . . ."

Jonas's nostrils flared. "She's convinced I was less than fair to the man."

"Were you less than fair, Mr. Moen?"

"Yes," he admitted drolly.

"The lady meets all of your qualifications." Raising a finger, she listed them off one at a time. "An immortal woman with a title, a pleasing form, nocturnal with Lunar fae ancestry, and she's desperate. But if you'd like

for me to see her off, I will. I could always tell her you've settled on another match."

Jonas wished he'd added a request for a personality to the list and maybe a few other points about strength of character, thinking of the fae chit who'd burst into tears during their first meeting last week. She was so intimidated by him and his reputation as a trickster, she couldn't meet his eyes. When he spoke, she fell to pieces.

The term trickster often referred to a fae with the ability to magically change their form into that of a beast, but Jonas was no mage. He was a different sort of trickster. The kind heralded by warnings and whispers.

Jonas leaned out to peer again at the mirror. It captured the witch's reflection, resting in a floral armchair. Her expression was cold and determined, not one bit intimidated or near tears. An unflattering knit shawl draped her arms. She pulled it up over her shoulders as he watched. The shawl, a thing he'd expect to find on a mourning woman at a funeral, was bulky and served to hide all the parts of her he'd rather look upon.

The Lady of Whiteholm was half-human and half-fae. No horns or tail. Her ears came to subtle points surrounded by ringlets of rich raven hair all pinned up tight in the high fashion, a loose curl framing her face. Her skin was a rosy shade of pink not found amongst mortals. He thought of the other candidates he'd met that week. Her lush form was unfortunately uncommon amongst fae kind.

Jonas didn't want to share a bed with a bony little waif like the matchmaker. Fae were more often than not thin and angular, all sharp edges. Lady Frances had *curves*. She was soft all over, and his blood fired at the thought.

Though he didn't look forward to being on the receiving end of her barbed tongue yet again, he was willing to admit that their previous encounters had at the very least never been dull.

Curiosity burning through him, he resigned himself. "I'll meet with her. But alone."

"It's a human custom that an unmarried woman be properly chaperoned," the matchmaker whispered. "I should sit in. The lady abides by—"

"Alone," he insisted. He had no patience for such customs. There were more humans and half-humans in River Row than fae, but that didn't mean he'd be bending over backwards for their oversensitive sensibilities. They should be glad he'd employed a matchmaker instead of doing things the old-fashioned fae way: selecting his bride on instinct and hauling her off over his shoulder.

His eyes met with the witch's in the mirror as though she had heard his thoughts. Her gaze was a rich hazel flecked in browns and greens like a ripe forest floor. There in the depths of those jeweled earth tones he found his own curiosity reflected at him alongside an unmistakable challenge. One of her gracefully manicured brows lifted.

He crooked a finger at her, and her nose wrinkled, resistance already brewing between them.

A thoughtless gesture was not the way to summon a lady. If she hoped he had plans to treat her with the stodgy manners of one of her peers, she was mistaken. He was the son of a grocer. The handful of silly social human rules he knew he had no intention of abiding by. Not today.

What fun would that be?

Grinning, he moved deeper into the dining room to wait on her. The matchmaker sent him a warning glance, then made herself scarce.

Several long moments passed with no sign of the witch. Jonas checked the gilded timepiece attached to the pocket of his waistcoat, shuffling his feet. Perhaps the lady had come to her senses and had decided not to play his game. The thought disappointed him more than he'd ever admit aloud. Frustrated, he scraped his boot at a corner of ornate rug where the threads had begun to fray.

Finally, gentle footsteps approached. She was still here. *My, my, she must be desperate indeed.* Jonas moved to the head of the table, resting his hand on the back of one of the chairs. Anticipation caused his pulse to jump. The dining area was furnished with smaller, more intimate place settings and too many bouquets of bright, strong-smelling flowers.

The witch moved gracefully into the room, somehow not hampered by the sizable bag on her hip. The scent of lavender water and honeycomb trailed her. Gaslights cast her in a warm glow.

"Mr. Moen," she greeted with a curt nod.

"Lady Aaberg," he purred.

At the table, she pulled out one of the padded chairs and set the carpet bag upon it. The upholstery rippled and moved, and then a lanky, scaled tail flopped out of the lip, a ruddy tail that belonged to her dragon familiar—a creature no bigger than a small dog. Frances perched on the edge of a chair beside her dragon, her gloved fingers folding demurely in her lap.

Little was known about witches—immortals who shared a piece of their soul with a familiar. He had any number of questions for her about all of that. When? Why? Why would anyone entrust such an intimate piece of themselves to another being, turning themselves into a witch, an outcast?

Were any of the legends about witches true?

But no question burned hotter than this: “What brings you here, Lady Aaberg?” he asked.

“Matrimony, of course,” she said softly.

They stared at each other for a moment in a silence so fraught with tension Jonas had the absurd urge to laugh. He remained standing, maintaining the high ground in the face of nearing battle. Her lashes lowered, a possible sign of surrender, but one Jonas was too suspicious of to act upon. Things had gotten rather heated between them the last time—and every other time they were near each other. He wouldn’t make the mistake of lowering his guard.

Frances cleared her throat with a dainty cough. “I should probably apologize for calling you a barbarian before.”

Jonas shoved his hands into his pockets, amusement tugging up the corner of his mouth. “A barbarian with a pea-sized heart and a cock for brains.”

Her cheeks colored a darker shade of pink than her natural hue. “I’d forgotten that last part.”

“You also wished I’d go live on the moon.”

A short burst of laughter rolled out of her. It took her a moment to regather her composure. “Ahem . . . That part I remember.”

Jonas smiled at her the way a fox might at a hen. “Are you sorry that you called me a barbarian?”

Her lips twisted, a nearly perfect image of a rosebud about to bloom. “I’m not,” she admitted. “Are you sorry that your deal with my father in his time of desperation was practically extortion?”

“Not at all,” he said dryly. “All the best bargains are made with a bit of extortion and a side helping of desperation.”

“Hmm,” she hummed, shooting him a glare that should have lowered the temperature in the room. Instead, it put something hot in his chest that made his skin go tight. Her lips pressed together in a way that suggested she was putting a lot of effort into keeping her next words inside her mouth.

He appreciated her restraint and her honesty. Honesty was incredibly important to the honor of the fae. Mortals told stories much too easily. A lot of their system of manners revolved around telling half-truths to make someone else feel important. As a man who was more than three centuries old, he’d never be able to find value in such a system.

Frances tugged loose her kid-skinned gloves one finger at a time, considering him out of the corner of her expressive eyes. “Are you planning to sit down?”

Jonas made a face at the large vase full of fae flowers. Fae flowers were sturdier than mortal ones and bloomed year-round. These were shaped like stars, had purple centers, and were surrounded in feathery little white buds. He nudged the vase farther down the table with the flat of his hand. “I’d rather stand for now.”

“Because of the flowers?”

His nose wrinkled. “Disturbing things . . .”

“You’re disturbed by *flowers*?” She blinked at him.

Head at a tilt, he shrugged. “Why’s that so hard to believe? Everyone is bothered by something.”

Waving dismissively with her gloves, she let out a breathy laugh. “Well of course, but usually they’re bothered by things that are actually

disturbing. I don't like snails or toads or warts, for example. That sort of thing is to be expected. Not flowers. Flowers are meant to be appreciated by all, a gift from the divines. They're lovely."

He glanced again at the vibrant blooms, lip curling in a grimace. "Their colors are too loud. They're obnoxiously perky for no reason at all, hopelessly fragile, they feed on manure, and they serve no purpose. If that's not enough, florals have a cloying smell that assaults my senses." He paused then, considering the pleasing scent she'd brought into the room. Sweet spring air clung to her. "Most florals," he amended.

"Hmm." Her lips pressed together again, this time suppressing a smile. "I suppose we should get started then."

"I'll grab the doors."

Frances reached for him, a halting gesture. "I'd rather you didn't."

Jonas's boots caught on the rug. He lingered there. "You'd prefer the doors were open for propriety's sake?"

"I would."

"An unmarried woman such as yourself wouldn't want to be ruined by spending time alone with an unmarried man," he droned, sarcasm dripping from his words. "Whatever would the scandal sheets say?"

A tiny tick in the corner of her mouth broadcasted her frustration. Otherwise, her face remained placid. "An unmarried woman and the wicked bargainer himself. Scandalous indeed."

"Wicked? Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, I think." Jonas's chuckle vibrated in his chest. "Do they not still call you the Wanton Witch of Whiteholm?"

"They do. You *know* they do," she said through clenched teeth. "I'm already the source of a great deal of whispers. I tire of giving the gossips

their thrills. Leave them open.”

“Chastity, what a ridiculous human custom,” Jonas said, continuing his leisurely path toward the archway. He grinned at her over his shoulder. “One’s reputation can’t become more ruined. Especially yours. Let us have our privacy. I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”

“And here we go,” she growled, rolling her eyes. “I have no desire to listen to more of your sermonizing on the topic of how the poor mortals have gotten it all wrong.”

“Not all wrong.” He drew in the heavy doors. They came together with a clatter. “What are those little sandwiches they eat? With the bread and the cucumber?”

“Cucumber *sandwiches*?”

He snapped his fingers delightedly. “Yes, those. I assumed they’d have a fancier name. The mortals got those right. They’re delicious.”

Frances balled up her gloves and chucked them into her bag. “And now you’re going to have a conversation entirely by yourself because—”

“But that’s sadly all the humans have gotten right. No one—”

“—because you’re incapable of listening to the opinions of others when they’re not exactly—”

“—should care whether or not you’re behaving like a good little human in here.”

“—like your own!” She raised her voice, but Jonas was prepared for the onslaught and remained unaffected. Her gaze flew up toward the tin ceiling tiles, exasperated. “Humans are inventive and clever, and their short lives should not be held against them. I’m human and I—”

“Only half. Your father is fae. There’s hope for you yet . . . Where are you going?” His brow furrowed.

Frances had leapt to her feet, grabbing up her carpet bag. She shuffled over to the corner to flop into a wingback chair beside a bureau adorned in more noxious fae flowers, a droopy looking set with fat petals that hung from thick dark green leaves. Instead of responding to him, she dropped her bag down on the floor beside her leg, drawing a grunt from the little dragon. The scaled tail slid inside briefly, reappearing moments later twined around a thick ball of red yarn and two long knitting needles.

Jonas shook his head at her, unable to make sense of her actions. “You’re . . . knitting? *Now?*”

The long tail unfurled a second time, a pair of spectacles coiled within it.

“Thank you, Iso.” Frances placed the spectacles on her nose, gathered up the instruments, and set to work, her mouth pursed. “Knitting, yes, that’s what it’s called. It’s another one of those mortal customs you hate. You’re probably going to wax on about that now, though I wish you wouldn’t.”

Jonas rubbed a small circle against his forehead, but her actions still made absolutely no sense. “*Why* are you knitting?”

“It soothes me when I’m stressed and irritated,” she grouched. “I’ve realized it was a terrible mistake coming here at all, but if I storm out now, rumors of a dalliance between us will circulate anyway, since you chose rudely to close the doors against my advisement. I’d rather take my time leaving. At least then the gossips will assume that the tuppings I’m not actually getting must have been enjoyable.”

“All that just from closing the door?” Jonas scratched at his scalp, confounded.

Her needles scraped together, forming the red yarn into a long plait. The spectacles that perched on her nose made her elegant face seem even more intense and expressive.

“Unless of course one of us winds up murdered in here . . .” Her knitting paused. “A tempting thought.” She chewed at her cheek, concentrating hard on one of the long, sharp tools in her hand, before she decided to resume her work.

Frances was probably the only immortal in all of River Row and the Faelands beyond who had poor eyesight. He couldn’t explain why that, and her thinly veiled threat, endeared her to him the tiniest bit, but it did. Her gaze flittered toward him, cold and unwavering.

“Stop that,” he grumped.

“Stop knitting?”

“Stop knitting at me *condescendingly*.”

Frances hunkered down in the chair, needles scraping together even faster, the plait growing. Now she was knitting at him spitefully. He couldn’t decide which was worse.

Did she mean it when she said she’d storm out? Jonas’s hands buried themselves deep in his pockets. Hovering by the doors, he swiped at the corner of the rug with his boot, irritated. As a fledgling fae, Jonas had been denied a great many things. Food and clean clothing were often amongst them. Now, as an adult who’d risen above his humble origins, he was determined to be refused *nothing*.

Absolutely, positively nothing.

And yet here she was, a titled woman who’d never experienced hunger a day in her life, declining him before he’d even made an offer for her.

If this was a ruse, if she was trying to make herself irresistible as a match, then, damnit, it was absolutely working. A muscle in his cheek jumped. He tried not to stare at her, but his gaze kept pulling toward her, fixated on her fast-moving fingers and the clickety-clack of those ridiculous wooden needles. It wouldn't do to let on his interest, he knew. A tradesman never shared how much they truly wanted something when they made a deal. It only raised the price.

Jonas shifted his weight, changing tactics. "I've met with a great many matches so far," he said conversationally. She need not know they had all bored him to tears. Even the few candidates who had mate potential were tiring. The stirring in his instincts in their presence had been so faint it was barely there.

"Good for you," she muttered. The knitted plait was the length of her forearm now. "May you and your future bride find eternal marital bliss." She stopped then, lowering her work. "If we're finished, I think I'll go now."

"Not just yet," he said archly. "Let the gossips believe I have more stamina than that, please."

Her mouth twisted, repressing a smile. "Since you said please . . ." She resumed her knitting.

"I was surprised to see you here," he confessed, gentling his tone. "I regret letting my surprise impact my choices. Especially if simply leaving the doors open would have encouraged you to stay. Frankly, I'm still baffled. I can't seem to wrap my head around why you're here."

A line deepened between her angular brows. "I already said, I thought. I was responding to your call for a bride. The one you put in the papers."

“Yes, I know, and naturally I’m familiar with your father’s financial situation. But after our last encounter, I’m astonished you’d come at all. I’m glad you did, to be frank, but still surprised.”

Her shoulders lifted modestly, a secret smile in the corner of her mouth. “I was certain you’d select me despite our complicated history.”

She’d lowered her voice. Jonas caught himself moving in closer to hear her better. “*Why?*” he stressed, the smell of lavender water strengthening in the air. She was right, clearly, but he still needed to know. “You called me a great many awful names. I was less than a gentleman in return. I’m less than a gentleman often, and usually quite unpredictable according to those who oppose me. What makes you so certain of my choices now?”

Her knitting returned to her lap. She met his eyes over the tops of her adorable spectacles. One delicate brow rose, and he felt it then. The blooming mate bond between them was nothing like it had been with those other matches—nothing like any mate bond he’d felt before in his long life. It wasn’t just an ember that needed to be nurtured into a fire. Mate bonds were fueled by instinct, the promise of a compatible match. When the bond between two with potential solidified, a true mate was formed, a gift from the divines.

Jonas swallowed hard. What burned between them was already a godsdamned inferno.

Chapter 2



Frances

Frances enjoyed watching the great proud Bargainer trip over his words, his mouth opening and then closing again, no coherent sounds coming out. His skin was a warm brown, but it was turning ruddier by the heartbeat. Like all fae, he was a beautiful specimen, all lean muscle, high cheekbones, dark eyes, and sharply defined features.

Jonas Moen was particularly captivating to her, as unstoppable and untamed as rapids, but tucked inside a waistcoat. He still dressed lowbrow despite his fortune. His suit jacket hadn't been tailored to fit him, and he'd pulled it on over traveling clothes. He often looked like he wasn't trying very hard.

It took her two hours to prepare to leave the house that evening. How unfair that he was still so handsome.

"I see," he said finally. His hand went to his hair, just under his small horns, raking anxiously through the mahogany strands. It was long enough to hide the points of his tall ears, and it constantly fell over his brow. What had lain straight was now mussed up.

It looked better mussed.

A smile spread her cheeks. She'd suspected he hadn't felt their connection the last time they were in a room together, shaking the walls

with their shouting in the foyer of the theater on Main Street. She hadn't felt it immediately either. She'd snarked at him several times in passing leading up to the event, and he'd fired right back at her at house parties, in the market, even on the street. Then there in the foyer of the theatre, while she'd been preparing for her next verbal assault, the blooming bond had stirred beside her heart. It had put off a heat that had curled through her.

No one was surprised that the wicked Bargainer and the Wanton Witch of Whiteholm had behaved so terribly in public. No one except for Frances. She hardly recognized herself. She'd managed to be a disciplined, respectable lady for more than 132 years. Then she went and got her heart broken, and now she was making one bad choice after another . . .

The gossips had chattered about the argument between her and Mr. Moen for weeks on end. A local artist had drawn a caricature of them strangling one another, and the image headed all the top scandal sheets for over a month. Neither had actually laid hands on the other, though some of the juicier retellings implied it.

"Since there's strong compatibility between us," Frances said slowly, working the yarn with her needles, "it stands to reason that a comfortable partnership could be forged between us. It also suggests that we likely want the same things. The way I see it, we'll be business partners, since I doubt very much that you're on the hunt for a love match. I'm certainly not."

"Business partners . . ." He stared at her like she'd just been shot out of a cannon. Jonas rubbed at a spot on his chest over his heart. "Yes, business partners." He had a faraway look in his dark eyes.

"But then you reminded me that you're incapable of being anything other than an absolute ass. I thank you for that reminder. Better now than

after it was too late.” She shoved the ball of yarn and the needles down into the carpet bag.

Ouch, her dragon familiar Iso grunted, sending her the word through the link of their soul.

So sorry, darling, Frances said with her thoughts, biting her lip.

No serious harm done, Iso replied groggily. Dragons were not nocturnal the way the Lunar fae were. For Iso, late evening was for sleeping, not for starting the day.

“Don’t leave just yet,” Jonas pleaded. His plaintive tone was gratifying, but Frances didn’t want to change her mind. Coming here had been a mistake. The wicked Bargainer didn’t have business partners.

He had victims.

“I think that’s long enough to convince the gossips I’ve had a marathon of a good time,” she said sardonically. Rising out of her seat, she dragged her bag up with her. Iso’s weight warmed her hip.

Jonas scoffed. “If you think that’s long enough for sex, especially good sex, then your past lovers all owe you an apology.”

Frances felt her face heating, embarrassment and some unnamable thing causing her pulse to jump. “Good day to you, Mr. Moen.” She made for the door.

Jonas moved in front of her. “You came here for a reason. Don’t forget all that now. Sit with me.” He motioned toward the table. “You were right. I’m not interested in a love match, so let’s talk business.”

She inhaled slowly, eyes drifting from his extended hand toward the padded chairs. Too many people counted on her, and she felt the weight of them always. Not only was her father in great financial trouble—trouble a tiny fraction of Jonas’s wealth could solve—but the livelihoods of

everyone their estates employed were at risk. If she stormed out now, she'd feel good for only a little while. Frances reached up to stroke a necklace and found only bare skin, forgetting too late that the charm she'd favored for most of her life was no longer there.

The Bargainer had taken it in trade.

How would she soon feel when the dowry they were living off of—the one that was supposed to be for her—dried up and left them all hungry?

She'd made so many poor choices. She was to blame for her ruined reputation. Her father had made some mistakes, but her scandal had alienated them from the help they'd needed. Marriage to this difficult man could fix all of that.

Jonas Moen brought out the absolute worst in her, but he was by and large her only option. Their mate potential was the only desperate card she had in play because no matter how much he infuriated her, the sad truth was she needed him far more than he needed her.

She eyed Jonas cautiously. "If I stay and talk to you, are you actually going to sit down this time and listen?"

"If you insist," he said wryly, "I'll sit right next to the damn flowers."

He sat as he said he would, and his eyes immediately went red-rimmed. A charming wrinkle creased the skin between his brows.

Frances reclaimed her former chair. For comfort, she kept her bag with Iso nestled on her lap. Stretching out an arm, she pushed the vase of flowers farther down the table. "There. Is that better?"

He nodded at her gesture of goodwill. "How long do you need?"

"How long for what?" She slipped a hand inside her bag and stroked Iso's long neck, soothed further by the dry warmth her familiar's scales emanated. The little dragon leaned into her affection.

“How long would you need to prepare for a wedding? I’ll handle all of the expenses, naturally.”

Frances stole a long inhale. “Before attempting such a venture, there are many considerations I’ll need you to agree to first.”

He waved her words away. “Assuming all of that is settled, how long? I’m a man who likes to make plans. I need to know.”

“Six months is customary for courting amongst humans. Followed by a six-month engagement.” She adjusted her glasses. Iso grunted at the lost contact, and Frances quickly resumed petting the familiar’s neck.

“Unacceptable,” he said.

Frances huffed out a breath. “Hasty marriages are seen as falsehoods for covering up a scandal. I don’t need more scandal in my life, Mr. Moen.”

“Three months total,” he offered, leaning back in his chair. He looked a bit more regal there than he had any right to in his casual, mismatched clothing and his mussed-up hair, the blood of a commoner pumping through his veins. “It’s the best I can do. I need a title sooner rather than later.”

“Is that all you need from your bride? A lord’s title?” She attempted to keep her tone relaxed, but his eyes narrowed as though he sensed her words carried more weight than she was letting on.

He laid his hands out on the table in front of him, spreading his fingers along the varnished wood. She watched his movements with interest. “In the future, I may need to work with individuals who will benefit from being given the fae lord experience. An experience I know nothing about.”

Frances nodded. She’d expected as much. “You need your wife to help you navigate the gentry and for your house to operate as though it’s owned

by a lord. That's not a problem. I've been a part of that life for more than a century." She chewed her cheek a moment. "But did you also have expectations for children? Heirs? Romance?"

"Romance," he snorted, and Frances immediately felt lighter at his dismissal.

"Romance is not something I need either," she said, a massive understatement. Not only was it something she didn't want, it was also something she wasn't capable of giving. Not ever again. "Children?"

Fae struggled to conceive—it was well-known. Fae children were seen as rare and sacred to some, but Frances already had too many people counting on her. There was an abundance of discarded children in the world, and the battle to conceive sounded positively daunting. It wasn't for her.

"No expectations," he said. "In fact, I'd prefer there wasn't a child."

She let out a relieved exhale. One less mouth to worry about feeding. She loved caring for people, but even she had her limits. An estate full of humans and their families already demanded so much of her. Humans didn't live very long, but they multiplied like rabbits in comparison to the fae.

"I agree wholeheartedly. You should probably have a look at this then." Frances held out her hand. *Iso, the terms please.*

Iso's red tail tightened around a clump of folded parchment, then she lifted it out of the bag for her mistress. The parchment was heavier than Frances remembered. Her fingers cramped sympathetically, remembering writing out every detail. It had taken several days to complete. She handed it over.

Jonas accepted the parchment and let it unfold.

And unfold and unfold . . .

“What in the hottest hell . . . ?” he exclaimed, as the back end of the parchment hit the floor.

“Those are my considerations,” she said primly.

His eyes were so brown they were nearly black. They scanned the document, growing in size as they went. “You wish to live out in the country at Whiteholm. It’s your ancestral estate. That’s to be expected, but you don’t wish to share a room at the manor. Why? Is that another silly human habit?”

Frances lifted her shoulders. It surprised her that he seemed to care about that one given his views on romance. “Privacy to start. This is a business arrangement, after all.”

He studied her over the top of the cream paper. “Business partners share an office, don’t they?”

Her cheeks heated, though she couldn’t fathom why. She scratched at her arms, uncertain of herself. “You don’t share an office.”

“I don’t have business partners either. I have subordinates. Other than those few, I work alone.” His gaze dragged over her, and Frances felt his look like a caress across her skin. She went hot all over. “If you insist, I’ll give you your own room. I’ll need to look over the rest of this . . . It’s going to take a while.”

Frances squinted at him. “Why?”

“Why is it going to take a while?” He shook the long parchment at her. “Would you look at the blasted thing? It’s longer than a royal trade agreement between the fae courts—that’s why.”

“No. I mean why are you giving me that consideration for free? I doubt you make a habit of letting people have things for nothing.”

“You’re right. It’s not for free.” A slow smile stretched his lips and her heart stuttered. “Trust me, Lady Aaberg, you don’t want to know why I’m letting you have that one.”

Frances frowned. “If I didn’t want to know, I wouldn’t have asked.”

His teeth scraped over his lower lip briefly. Drawn in by the motion, her skin pebbled. This wasn’t just any smile spreading his lips. It was the Bargainer’s grin, like the wicked fae of legend, the immortal who collected souls in trade from desperate men. As the story went, the trickster fae had traded so many souls that the holy creators took notice. They offered him divinity in exchange for releasing them. In some of the legends, the Bargainer released the souls and became a god. According to other legends, he kept those souls and became a wicked witch, turning them into familiars . . .

As far as she knew, Jonas Moen only collected coins and treasures from the desperate, but looking into his eyes now, she couldn’t put it past him that he’d never taken more.

“I’m a barbarian,” he reminded her, his voice velvety soft. “I’ll let you have a room to yourself in our home because you possess within your bodice two perfectly formed assets that I’ve deemed worthy of a consideration or two.”

Frances sighed. “Oh, couldn’t you just have said ‘I think you’re pretty, Lady Aaberg. Here’s one on me.’”

“I could say that right now,” he drawled, “but I won’t. I don’t wish to give you the wrong impression of me.”

“There’s no risk of that.” Taken with his dry humor, her words wobbled. Frances pulled her shawl up higher around the collar of her dress, concealing the *assets* in question. “Since that’s settled, would you

agree that it's been long enough to appease the talkative servants outside? By now they should believe our tryst was an enjoyable one, shouldn't they?"

He gave her a cursory once-over. "You don't look nearly ravished enough, I'm afraid, but I'll let you go since that can't be helped. Can I call on you again after I've finished reviewing this . . . trade agreement?"

"You may," she said cautiously. "You've been to my home already to see my father, so I assume you haven't forgotten the way. He and I keep Lunar hours, but you should probably know that four times a week I volunteer at the medical dispensary on Fever Street. It's the red brick building beside the apothecary cottage. You'll want to send a note before dropping by to make sure I'm available. You'll also want to send a note because that's good manners, but I bet you don't care about those."

He didn't contradict her.

She hoisted her carpet bag over her arm and stood. Jonas followed and opened the doors for her, a gentlemanly gesture that took her by surprise. They hovered together on the threshold, both uncertain how to part ways, instinct thrumming between them, charging the air. Once again, her cheeks were hot, but the heat wasn't uncomfortable. Not exactly. She was overly aware of this man. She couldn't help but notice his every movement, every shift of his weight, his change in breathing, the way his pupils dilated to nearly encompass the brown irises . . .

Iso's diamond-shaped head peeked out over the lip of the bag as Frances waved to him awkwardly, face flushing. His Bargainer's smile returned.

Oh my. If I had a hoard like a proper dragon, Iso said, I'd fill it with beautiful men just like this one. Gorgeous fae with long legs and lean

muscles who lived to serve me.

Frances chuckled. *Oh but, Iso, you are a proper dragon.*

Iso let out a sad sooty snort that smelled like brimstone. *You're the only one who thinks so.*

Chapter 3



Jonas

Jonas was the unofficial king of trade in River Row. His office was located on the corner of Ferrywick and Second, in a tall stone and steel building. He'd rented out the entire edifice because he valued quiet and didn't want to be disturbed by neighbors, which meant most of the offices remained empty. He had only a tiny number of staff, including a clerk, a secretary, and an accountant. He paid them generously to compensate for working them hard and for tolerating his gruff nature.

In less than a week, Jonas had picked apart the contents of the agreement written up by his intended. Actually, he wasn't sure what to call Lady Aaberg now. They were discussing marriage. Did that mean they were officially courting? And why was he uncomfortable asking for confirmation on this point? He'd asked her several questions already by letter. Since it was a business arrangement, was he expected to bother with presents and pet names . . . if they were, in fact, courting at all?

The entire situation made him feel out of his element. Could it be that he was worried she might deny him again? And what would he do if she did? When he landed on a bargain he wanted, he was tenacious in acquiring whatever it was in trade. This was different, though.

A bride was for keeps. Not for trade.

In the past few days, he'd learned everything that was publicly known about Lady Aaberg and her father, the Earl of Westarow. He knew her schedule—she volunteered far too much. He knew her friends—there weren't many anymore, not since the scandal that ruined her. Her finances—there wasn't much left of those either. And her habits—she hardly traveled outside of the city of River Row.

In his office, he stood before the wide window behind a massive ornate desk befitting a king of business. The window overlooked the river Eventide that bordered the city and was the reason he'd chosen this building to rent. When he wasn't staring at documents, he liked to watch the ferries coming and going. Their perpetual motion aided his thinking.

He slipped his hands into his pockets, watching dusk take root over the Row. The skies turned purple as the sun dipped closer to the horizon alongside fat nimbus clouds. Lamplighters littered the cobblestone streets below. From three floors up, they appeared small enough to fit in his hand.

Between tasks, Jonas sent Frances notes, usually by employing a messenger, sometimes two or three a day since they'd parted ways at the matchmaker's hall. They had a great many things to discuss, but he had no time at the moment to set up a meeting, and so written correspondence was unavoidable. He was in the process of buying up a railyard that he planned to dismantle and sell in pieces and parts. A deal that would have been so much easier to complete were he already a member of the finest club in River Row: The Diamond Scar.

Jonas was *not* sending Frances notes because he enjoyed communicating with the witch. Such nonsense would be pointless between business partners. His thoughts got away from him then, drifting to the letter he'd sent late that afternoon, shortly after waking.

Lady Aaberg,

One of your considerations detailed the need for pet cats at Whiteholm. Cats are cold and condescending creatures. They lick themselves in a most agitating manner. Can't you make do with your little dragon as company?

Respectfully,

A Concerned Business Partner

Lady Frances had responded within the hour. Her note had been delivered by her familiar. The edges of the post had been singed, and it still smelled of brimstone. The note remained in his pocket, warm to the touch. He pulled it out and unfolded it again. Jonas had a sharp memory and remembered what it said. Despite that fact, he felt compelled to take in her words once more, fingering the deep pen scratches on the page as he did so.

Mr. Moen,

Iso is not a pet. She's my familiar, a powerful magical companion. Dragons are people, not animals. She'll spit fire at you if you ever suggest otherwise in her presence. My father made that mistake once, and she melted his favorite pair of boots. Don't underestimate her because of her size. She is small, but she is mighty.

Secondly, I like cats. They're excellent mousers and an important part of the ecosystem in any country estate. The cats can stay outside in the barns so that you won't have to look at their condescending faces. In the name of compromise, I'll agree to move the rose beds to the back of the house so you don't have to look at those either. Reconsider your point.

Civilly,

A Levelheaded Business Associate

He folded the note back up, contemplating dropping it into the trash bin. He had no further need of it, and yet . . . he put it back into his pocket instead. Jonas readied a piece of paper from his desk and scribbled another note. He wanted to know if they were courting but refused to ask that question in such a direct fashion, despite the fact that he usually favored fae-like frankness.

Lady Aaberg,

I'll concede to allowing you your beloved cats in exchange for keeping them in the barns and moving the pretentious rose beds to the back of the house.

In your trade agreement, you've listed out a great many restrictive, formal mortal traditions that you'd like me to adhere to during our courting and engagement. Please confirm that I am understanding your wishes correctly: during this time, you want me to treat you the way a human man would treat a human woman, despite the fact that we are both immortal fae.

Respectfully,

A Concerned Business Partner

Jonas sent the note off with his secretary. His office hours were just starting, but the rest of the workers, Seelie men, shuffled off before dark six days a week. He preferred that his staff keep different hours from him so that he had his offices to himself most of the time.

Jonas wasn't expecting to hear from Lady Aaberg again that night. It was one of the evenings she was scheduled to volunteer at the medical dispensary as a nurse.

Forty minutes later, while he reviewed mapped routes of the railyard he intended to buy, he was pleasantly surprised by a scratch at his window. Iso, the little red dragon, clawed gently at the glass at his back, a corner of parchment between her sharp teeth. He unlocked the window with a turn of the metal latch, opened it wide, and accepted the post. The witch's familiar took to the skies again, leathery wings unfurling.

Crisp night air poured in over the sill, chilling him. He closed the window and unfolded the note.

Mr. Moen,

I am a human woman. Please respect my wishes during our courting and stop trying to find a way around them.

Less Civilly,

Your Agitated Business Associate

Ah. So they *were* in fact courting now. Strange how that made him feel lighter somehow. He wasn't sure what to make of that.

Jonas had predicted she'd respond in a stubborn, irritated fashion. And yet there he stood, grinning like a fool at nothing in particular. Frances had a habit of inspiring his smiles and his annoyance all at once, firing his blood. If she insisted on adhering to human traditions, then he'd give her *exactly* what she asked for until she regretted challenging him. His grin grew into a broad smile as the sun sank completely behind the horizon and nighttime awoke the Lunar city.

* * *

A week later—and seven more arguments with Frances resolved by written correspondence—Jonas sent a messenger just after the midnight meal to warn Lord Bjorn Aaberg, the Earl of Westarow, of his intentions to visit his estate shortly.

Ever the gentleman, the earl responded to advise him that his daughter was not currently present but that his visit would be welcomed regardless. Jonas knew Frances was volunteering again. In fact, he'd counted on her not being at home. It was the earl he needed to see.

Always punctual, Jonas arrived promptly at the agreed-upon hour at the earl's sprawling urban estate. Lord Bjorn Aaberg proved to be a kind man, despite Jonas's trickster-like behavior during his prior visit. The lord welcomed Jonas to take tea with him. Four months before, the earl had needed to trade a great many precious heirlooms to escape a debtor's prison and didn't have the time or the freedom to strike a profitable bargain with the reputable sort.

So the earl had relied on the disreputable sort. Lord Bjorn had called upon Jonas, and the Bargainer had answered.

Clearly, Frances continued to have extremely sour feelings about his treatment of her father, but even she had to admit that the trade had at least served its purpose. It had kept the earl out of jail, hadn't it?

Lord Bjorn was a tall fae man with long honey-colored hair he kept tied back in a queue. His short, twisted horns and his lion-like tail showcased his Lunar heritage. The tail was covered in velvety fur that matched his hair in color, with a tuft of black on its tip. He had his daughter's hazel eyes, kind and less penetrating, and yet Jonas found himself struggling to meet them as they sat together in the parlor of the fae lord's home in the west of the city.

They reclined in overstuffed armchairs across from a cart full of refreshments. The fire and candles burned low around them. Nocturnal eyes needed very little light to see.

It would have been easier to tolerate the earl if the man wasn't being so friendly, Jonas decided. This wasn't at all the sort of treatment he'd anticipated—wasn't at all what he deserved.

Jonas held an ignored cup of tea that was quickly going cold between his fingers while the earl discussed the favorable changes in weather brought on by late spring.

Jonas didn't feel *guilty*, did he? No, he couldn't, he chided himself. He never felt guilty for making a deal another agreed to. It wasn't as though he'd forced the man to take the poor offer at dagger point. The coins Jonas had given him were a quarter of what the heirlooms and jewelry were worth, yes, but that was the nature of business. The Bargainer had profited greatly. Profit was the point, the reason for every decision he made.

He would be denied nothing. Wealth made that possible.

Frances's angry words from that night in the theatre foyer taunted him. He hadn't had to force anyone, he noted sourly. The sentence hanging over the earl's head applied all the necessary pressure.

"Are you going to continue quietly listening to me blather on, Mr. Moen," the earl said, a playful tilt to his mouth, "or are you finally going to tell me why you're here?"

Jonas returned his cooling cup to the cart and rubbed irritably at the strange ache above his heart. If the blooming bond was responsible for this odd sensation in his chest, he'd need to do something about that sooner rather than later. It couldn't be healthy for his heart to constantly palpitate in such a fashion. "I've been instructed by your daughter to seek your blessing regarding our engagement."

The earl sipped from his steaming teacup. "A mortal tradition. One you don't appear to be too happy about . . ."

"I wasn't at first," Jonas said, finding his fae frankness, "but then I remembered that, according to human habits, she's allowed no say in this process because she's a woman. It's up to you and me. Since she's the one insisting I follow these silly rules, I find myself amused. I plan to take advantage of them all now, and according to her own traditions, she won't be allowed to stop me."

"Hmm. Then it's safe to assume my daughter doesn't know you're here to secure my blessing." The earl leaned forward to top off his cup from a ceramic pot decorated in painted pink flowers. If he was bothered by Jonas's intent to teach Frances a lesson, he hid it well.

"No, she doesn't know I'm here." Jonas's lips quirked.

"I've known my daughter for one hundred and thirty-two years. A word of advice regarding her." Lord Bjorn took a moment to stir a lump of

sugar into his tea before continuing. “Frances doesn’t like surprises. If it’s a true partnership you seek with her, then I strongly recommend you talk to her first about the arrangements before carrying them out.”

“Does that mean I don’t have your blessing to marry her?”

“On the contrary,” the earl said with a low chuckle. “I know when I’ve lost a battle of wills with my daughter. She’s stubbornly decided that a match with you is the only way to fix our predicament. I’d have an easier time teaching a duck not to quack than I would convincing Frances she’s wrong.”

Jonas grunted his agreement. “She does seem to possess a strong resolve, but isn’t she correct? Aren’t I and my wealth the only way to fix your problems?” He was well-versed in the Aaberg financial situation now. The earl had trusted the wrong estate manager two years prior. Embezzlement had drained most of his coffers, and then when the debtors came calling, the culprit fled the Faelands, leaving the earl to foot the bill or face debtor’s prison.

“Actually no,” Bjorn said. His tail flicked out from behind him to fall alongside his pantleg. He took a long quiet swallow, back poised, the picture of the perfect gentleman. “The best thing to do would be to cut unnecessary expenses, sell off some of our lands, and significantly downsize the staff on each of our estates. We’ll recuperate slowly over time that way.”

Jonas’s brow furrowed. “I suppose your daughter has become accustomed to a certain lifestyle after all these years. . .”

Bjorn returned his cup to its saucer. “Not at all. She’s made the most sacrifices of either of us. There will be no dowry for her should you wed. The estate she inherited from her mother, the country home she loves, is

falling into disrepair. It isn't the lifestyle at all. Her issue is cutting the staff and selling land with tenants who depend on us. You see, most of our staff are descended from one family. Her mother—may she walk the stars in peace—promised to always care for this particular mortal family, to always have a job for those who needed one. The Archer family.”

“Mortals multiply rather rapidly,” Jonas added.

“Unfortunately yes, and Frances feels responsible for them all. As do I, within reason.”

“I'm the only option to save their jobs,” Jonas concluded.

Bjorn lifted the cup in gentle salute. “The only option she'll tolerate.”

“Such a noble sacrifice, throwing herself on the sword by wedding *me*,” Jonas teased.

“Don't misunderstand me, I love my daughter dearly, but an argument can be made that you too are throwing yourself on your sword here.” The earl's flaxen brows lifted. “Is it safe to assume you're aware of the state of her reputation?”

Jonas waved a dismissive hand. “I'm aware she was caught with a lover she was treating at the medical dispensary sometime last year . . . some lord's son who was too cowardly to wed her after he ruined her. I've never been moved by mortal sensibilities. I'm not bothered that she's had other lovers.”

“Lord Glen Freest was the gentleman, though I use that term ironically. He's a popular marquess's second son and a rascal.” Indignation tightened Bjorn's features. “There was mate potential between them. When the scandal sheets started in on her with their malarkey, Glenn promised to make it all right. He swore it didn't matter—his own character had been spared, of course.”

“Humans have such strange ideas about women when it comes to these things. I’ll never understand why they’re always so suspicious of them,” Jonas noted.

“They claimed Frances was trying to trap Glen. The gossips accused her of seeking a man with a wealthy family to fix all of her father’s growing problems. Then suddenly Glen’s letters to reassure her stopped coming . . . and after she’d sacrificed so much for him, including a piece of her soul to save him . . .” A muscle in the earl’s jaw clenched, and Jonas’s curiosity rose. “It destroyed her. They’d started to bond while she cared for him, you see. Then, because of the slander against Frances, my human creditors pulled back their support when I needed them most. Frances carries more guilt on her shoulders than she deserves. She’d only acted on instinct, as had the marquess’s son. What fae could fault her for that?”

Jonas sensed the man was getting somewhere but had fallen short. “Why do you want me to know all of this?”

“Frances has been hurt once before by a mate,” Bjorn said, eyes flashing. “She’s been hurt *enough*.”

“Message received,” Jonas said. “I’ll not abandon her, and I plan to treat her well after we’re married.” Though beforehand he would torment her just a bit since she seemed intent on doing the same to him. Despite their antagonism toward each other, he had no intention of hurting Frances. In fact, he preferred a happy bride. She’d make him less miserable in turn that way. Naturally he wouldn’t see her harmed.

Just severely irritated from time to time.

“Then you have my blessing. After reviewing them, of course, I’ll sign any documents you give me on the matter.” Bjorn extended his hand.

Jonas took it, clasping him at the wrist in the Lunar fae fashion.

Chapter 4



Mr. Moen,

I do not appreciate the colorful announcement of our engagement in the papers. You failed to discuss any of this with me first. We haven't yet had an appropriately lengthy courtship, and the picture you selected to represent our upcoming union is ghastly. A caricature of us strangling each other—though an accurate depiction of our innermost feelings—is not a proper picture. This is not the way of things.

My father advised me of your visit and his “blessing”. What game are you playing at?

Uncivilly,

Your Furious Future Bride

Lady Aaberg,

Your instructions were explicit. I'm to treat you during our engagement the way a mortal man would treat you. As human women aren't given deference in these matters, I took it upon myself to free you of the burden of selecting the method of announcing our engagement. And now that it's settled, you won't be bound by such

strict societal rules when we need to meet. You won't require a chaperone or risk further ruin, and I can call on you when I must.

You are most welcome for my efforts toward a speedy matrimony, but do let me know if you've decided that in the future, you'd like for me to regard you the way the fae would instead—as a woman of worth.

Respectfully,

Your Obedient Future Husband

Mr. Moen,

Do not attempt to take the moral high ground with me! You and I both know the fae have a history of kidnapping their brides. What sort of self-worth am I to get from that?

Uncivilly,

Your Increasingly Hostile Intended

Dear Hostile,

Kidnapping one's mate was a selection process, not a wedding. Perhaps you don't remember because you aren't as old as I, but women were allowed to leave if they wanted to . . . eventually. Marriage was certainly always their choice first and foremost. Making the escape too easy was seen as an insult to one's intended. The chase and the capture was part of the fun for both parties.

If you ever tire of being a good little human, I'd be happy to demonstrate the old ways so you can decide for yourself which is superior.

Respectfully,

Your Future Husband

Dear Obedient Future Husband,

I hope my engagement present found you well this evening. Please note that it is human custom that I present you with a gift from my heart. Were you to reject this offering, it would be the same as rejecting the engagement itself, making the documents you've signed no longer binding.

Warmly,

Your Amused Betrothed

Dear Amused,

The feral beast you call an engagement present vomited a hairball into my boot, dug a hole in the carpets, and shat under my desk. When she isn't licking herself all over, her face is permanently patronizing.

The second we are living in Whiteholm, the creature will be banished to the barns!

IratelY Yours,

Jonas

* * *

Frances

Frances reflected on Jonas's last few letters throughout her shift at the dispensary, a redbrick building in central River Row.

This reflection was an improvement upon all the accidental daydreaming she'd been doing earlier regarding Jonas's promise to show her the 'old ways.' Immediately, images of him surprising her on the street, throwing her over his shoulder, and stealing her away from all of her troubles came to mind.

The thought was absurd, of course. Bond-fed nonsense.

Nonsense that made her blood surge and her core heat and the pulse between her thighs thud out of control . . . She struggled to focus on tidying up around the laboratory, making sure the implements were properly sterilized and put away.

It helped to remind herself how much she and Jonas didn't get on. They were reluctant business partners who barely tolerated each other and nothing more.

Frances was not actually a volunteer at the medical dispensary, but it was considered inappropriate by human standards for a lady of nobility to work outside of the home. *Volunteering*, however, was an honorable endeavor. Her reputation had been damaged enough, first by her becoming a witch, and then because of the scandal involving her previous mate. Both had nearly lost her the job at the dispensary. The mortal owner had been irate. She didn't want another mark against her now.

The physician who practiced at the dispensary, Dr. Bandile, was mortal but with distant fae ancestry. He was understanding of her plight and appreciated her work. He paid her "donations" in secret. Their arrangement made it possible for Frances to continue footing the bill for staff wages at Westarow and their other estates without downsizing.

Working in secret wasn't a long-term solution, however. Her dowry continued to dwindle despite her best efforts.

Frances finished sweeping the tile floors. She was dead on her feet. The dispensary had been very busy that night, but thankfully sunrise was quickly approaching and currently the building was empty. If it stayed that way much longer, she could lock up early.

A strange biped is headed your way, Iso said through the link of their souls. Frances sensed she was on the roof near the awning. *A man, I think, but I can't tell what kind . . .*

Iso did not come into the dispensary with Frances. Witches usually lived alone in the wilds as societal outcasts. Mortals—and many immortals—distrusted witches on account of the unfriendly legends about them. The legends were poppycock, superstitious storytelling, but the greater public didn't know any better.

Her familiar was an uncomfortable reminder of what Frances was now, what she'd chosen to become, and so at the suggestion of Dr. Bandile, Iso remained out of sight but kept close by.

Strange how? Frances asked.

Here he comes now, Iso warned, and the glass door opened. A bell above the lintel chimed.

The human man, homeless based on his stained and threadbare clothing, limped inside past the benches designated for waiting patients. She'd helped many a street person in her time at the dispensary, always on Dr. Bandile's generous coin. But this man was different.

His face was covered in warts. Large, strange warts. More than she'd ever seen in her life. Frances had witnessed a great many odd things working as a nurse, but this made her gasp. His eyes were slits, he had so many bumps on his face.

"There you be, my lady," the man crooned. "Right where he said."

“Who said?” Frances stepped back out of the entryway, into the treatment laboratory.

“Only you can help me, my lady.” Waddling after her, he reeked of incense—the smell of moon magic.

Frances sighed, understanding dawning. “Did this ‘he’ you speak of pay a Lunar mage to fill your face with warts and then send you after me?”

The man looked her carefully up and down through his swollen gaze. “It’s you, all right. Come here, my lady.” He opened his arms and flung them around her shoulders in an awkward embrace.

Frances resisted recoiling. He smelled of soiled fabric and a sour unwashed body. Half-fae, she had keener senses and was significantly stronger than the street man. His bones were fragile twigs under her hands. She had to be careful not to hurt him when she pushed him back into the nearest padded chair, the one without arms which they used to treat patients. “How about I give you something to eat, eh? While you wait for that spell to wear off of your face . . . mister . . . ?”

“Mr. Ramsey. The chap I met over by Ferrywick said you’d be sweet to me.” He scratched at the collection of warts on his chin. “Said you had a soft spot for needy humans like meself, he did. Said you’d help, and he gave me a lift here. Been an age since I’s sat in a carriage, and this one was fancy.”

“It’s not that soft a spot, Mr. Ramsey. Not if you don’t behave yourself,” Frances warned, wagging a finger at him. “No more embraces without my permission. But do as I say, and I’ll see you to rights.”

The man threw his palms up in surrender. “On my honor, I’ll be on my very best behavior, my lady. Keep my hands to meself, I will. You have my word.”

Do you need any help in there? Iso offered. Frances sensed she was perched on the roof near the awning. Usually, she napped most of the night away, but she'd been anxious of late.

No, no, just more Jonas mischief, Frances said soothingly. *He's brought me a human to fix up, one covered in warts, I think in retaliation for the kitten we sent. He's trying to disturb me. I suppose he hasn't considered I'm a nurse. Nothing truly disturbs me anymore.*

Well, he's succeeded in disturbing me, Iso said.

Frances went to the back office and fetched what remained of the midnight meal she hadn't finished: pea soup and a chunk of bread. She brought it to her patient.

He accepted her offerings despite the soup being cold. Shoving a corner of the crust in his mouth, he spoke around it. "The chap bought two spells. The first took some of the sting out of me foot. The second robbed me of my looks. Ha! He didn't want me winning you over with my charms, I'd wager. Good thing magic don't last very long on humans, eh?"

Frances disagreed. A lot of good could be accomplished if moon magic functioned better on humans. Mages could work their wonders and blisters would no longer cost street people their feet. Only the most powerful blood magic could be used to heal humans, and there wasn't much of that available in the Lunar Province. "Good thing," she said politely.

"The chap said I'd know it was you when I saw the beautiful fae woman with rich raven hair and emeralds in her eyes . . ." He chewed loudly, pointing at his ears to indicate the arch of hers. Frances felt a bit of warmth in the blooming bond within her at being described in such lovely terms, and then the man swallowed and continued. "And the most perfect tits . . . Mean no disrespect, my lady, but he was right on all accounts."

His eyes dropped to her chest, and all of Frances's warm feelings evaporated. It was impossible to keep such a large endowment completely muted, even behind her thick apron.

"Of course, he couldn't just tell you my name," she groused.

"It's terrible with names, my lady. The chap said he needed to teach you a lesson, but . . ." Mr. Ramsey tapped the side of his nose and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I think he's sweet on you. A man wouldn't go to so much trouble otherwise."

She smiled at him with the practiced grace of a woman used to service and accustomed to the crass nature of the population she served. With effort, she managed not to grind her teeth at the notion of being 'taught a lesson'. "You're limping, Mr. Ramsey. What's bothering your foot?"

"Got a nasty blister. Smells terrible— Oh, fore I forget, the chap gave me this." He pulled a scrap of parchment out of his pocket, made filthy by his fingers.

She plucked it from him and unfolded it.

We need to talk.

-Jonas

Her heart lurched uncomfortably at the tone of the note. It lacked all of his usual smarmy playfulness. And why should she be so nervous? She chided herself, but still her palms went sweaty, dampening the paper. She tucked it away in her apron pocket.

He'd announced their engagement publicly. The documents were signed by him and her father. He wouldn't be so cruel as to walk away now, would he? Was it because of the cat she'd gifted him last evening?

Was he so easily undone? Frances chewed her lip, drowning in her thoughts as she propped up Mr. Ramsey's foot on a stool and peeled away his old boot, no stockings.

Mr. Ramsey ate his food and serenaded her with a drinking song about a buxom barmaid who lost her favorite ribbon and then her virginity to the man who found it for her.

His blister was indeed terrible, and quite infected. He was going to lose that foot if he didn't take better care of it, and soon. She told him so sternly.

"You're to come back here daily, Mr. Ramsey," she ordered. "We'll have a fresh pair of stockings for you and reapply clean bandages to help see you healed. But you must do your part. You have to return."

Thick, sterile stockings were the only chance he had, and it made her sad that something so basic as a lack of them might cost this man his foot. Surviving on the street required that he keep moving, which meant he probably wouldn't come back.

She cleaned the injury, opened the blister, and let out the pus. The sickly-sweet smell of rot wrinkled her nose. He didn't seem to feel much of the pain, stopping the second rendition of his song only for a moment to suck in a sharp breath, which concerned her further. She applied powdered garlic to the wound. It did terrible things to the odor.

Despite the stench, Mr. Ramsey continued eating and singing, his mood unchanged.

After cleaning his foot and packing it tight, she gave him an injection of bromine. The injection could cause more tissue damage than he already had. That loss of feeling might be dangerous for him, encouraging him to ignore his foot when he needed to be caring for it, but she couldn't just let

him go without doing something for that infection. He'd end up with a fever for sure and die in the street . . .

She hated decisions that put her between a rock and a hard place, even though she faced such choices constantly. She should be used to them by now. Mortals were so very fragile . . . With a resigned sigh, Frances's fingers went to her neck, reaching for a charm that had been made to honor her mother. A memory flat, humans called them, kept to remember a deceased loved one, a charm she'd worn for over a century, but it was gone now, taken by the Bargainer in trade. She touched nothing but pink skin and felt cold all over.

Men like Mr. Ramsey were exactly why she couldn't turn her back on the Archer family the way her father had suggested. Too many humans ended up on the streets in River Row. Certainly, some of them would find employment elsewhere, but perhaps not all. She couldn't doom any of them to such a life as this. Most of her staff were adults now, by human standards, but she could still remember when they were in diapers, carried on the hips of their loyal mothers before them. How could she turn her back on any of them? How could her father ask her to?

Frances did what she could for Mr. Ramsey. He was back out navigating the cobblestones of Fever Street as the sun rose. When he was gone, she hung up her heavy apron, washed her hands thoroughly with hot water and tallow soap at the taps at the back, then she gathered her shawl and her carpet bag and locked up the dispensary using a big brass key. Dr. Bandile would return in a few hours to open it again.

You have a visitor, Iso warned. She was perched on the awning just over the door, long neck craned to peer at her upside down.

Frances glanced up at the dragon, a question catching on her tongue. She sensed him then, felt the drumbeat of their connection even at a distance. She turned to find Jonas rounding the street corner, a small white kitten trotting just behind him, its tiny legs struggling to keep up with his long strides.

A top hat sat askew on his head, covering one of his short bracket-shaped horns. Her carriage was down that same street, waiting for her. He passed it, ignoring the greeting the mortal driver lobbed his way. The four days a week she worked, she stayed with her father, instead of at her country estate. Depending on the hour, it took longer to reach Westarow by carriage than it did to walk, but it wasn't considered proper for a lady to amble about unescorted in the city, and Frances was nothing if not proper . . . usually.

The man eating up the walkway with prowling steps had a habit of bringing out the fiercely fae parts of her. She bristled, clutching her carpet bag more tightly, her heartrate climbing the nearer he came. How odd that her body felt as though it were preparing for war rather than a conversation.

His face was stern, his jaw shadowed by stubble streaked in a series of bright red scratch marks. Frances bit back a smirk.

"Mr. Moen," she greeted.

"Lady Aaberg." When he came to a stop, the kitten jogged up beside him and climbed onto the toe of his boot. She perched there, a poof of snowy fur, considering Frances and the small dragon on the awning with her neck crooked. Immediately bored, the kitten turned to paw at her master's laces.

"You wished to talk to me?" Frances prompted.

Jonas stared back at her, not saying anything, and her anxiety grew. He palmed at the space above his heart, over his waistcoat. She wondered if the bond was making his pulse pump just as vigorously as hers was. “Yes . . .” he grunted.

Frances wrung her hands around the handles of her carpet bag. When he didn’t elaborate, she filled the silence. “And how are you fairing with my engagement present?” She jutted her chin at the kitten, who was now flexing her claws into the leather of his boot.

“Cat and I have come to a mutual understanding,” he explained. “If I allow her to follow me about everywhere I go, she won’t destroy my office, and if I share my hot eels with her when I’m eating, she doesn’t try to claw my face off.”

Laughter burbled out of Frances. She tried to repress it and snorted. “I see you’ve named her. A fitting title, Cat.”

Jonas didn’t reply, falling quietly contemplative once again.

He’s being awfully aloof, isn’t he? Iso noted. *If you’d like—*

I don’t think melting his boots would help in this case. Frances cast a warning glance over her shoulder.

Perhaps his trousers this time? That’d get him talking for sure.

You just want to see him out of his trousers. Frances rubbed at her cheek, hiding a grin.

So do you . . .

At that, Frances cleared her throat. “That’s a rather nasty set of scratches you’ve got there, Mr. Moen. Why don’t you come inside and let me have a look at them?”

Better check the rest of him for scratches too, Iso suggested helpfully.

Face heating, Frances fished the brass key back out of her carpet bag. She turned it in the lock until it gave with an audible click. Jonas followed her inside, Cat clinging to his boot. Frances draped her shawl over the bench in the entryway, then continued to the laboratory.

Jonas eyed suspiciously the many beakers and jars and implements that lined the stacked shelves. Medical science had recently leaped forward, thanks to the inventiveness of mortals. It didn't surprise her in the least that an older fae such as Jonas would find it all a little peculiar.

He stopped in front of a metal device shaped like an odd pair of tongs with a crank and scope on one end. He tapped the instrument. The crank spun, knocking the device onto its side with a clatter, and Jonas started.

"That's called a speculum," Frances said, chuckling under her breath. "Rest assured you don't want to know what it's used for."

Jonas's brown eyes went wide. "I'll take your word for it."

"The messenger you employed earlier was rather different from the others," she said archly, making conversation as she found an open bit of counter on which to rest her bag. She motioned for him to sit in the padded chair with no armrests.

He lowered himself stiffly, hands on his knees. Cat attempted to climb his trouser leg. He chided her, and she slid back down to his boot, meowing pathetically. "I take it you were able to help Mr. Ramsey?"

"I was. The warts were a nice touch, though I assure you I've been embraced by a great deal worse in my time here than him," she said, glad he was finally talking. "If your aim was to disturb me, then your efforts sadly fell short."

"Embraced?" he snarled. Menace scrunched up his angular features. "No one told the scoundrel he could touch you." His hands flexed ever so

slightly over his knees like he wanted to ball them into fighting fists. He started to rise out of the chair.

Frances caught his shoulders and pushed him back down again. “Where are you going?”

He gritted his teeth. “I intend to have a word with the scamp.”

“Don’t be a bonding barbarian.” Her voice wobbled, laughter mingling with exertion. “He meant no harm, and I’m significantly stronger than the mortal anyway. What could he have done to me?”

It took a considerable amount of that fae strength to keep Jonas in the chair. Good gods, under the broadcloth of his shirt, he was as solid as stone. She was quite certain he could fling her off easily if he had a mind to.

Instead, Jonas folded his arms across his broad chest, muscles coiling. “He can get his own damn mate, the scoundrel,” he muttered.

Frances didn’t bother pointing out that humans didn’t have mates or bonds or magically-induced instincts. Clearly, his senses had taken over most of his reasoning, so she didn’t attempt logic with him. Fae were not usually the jealous sort, but the blooming bond had an overwhelming effect on newly matched pairs.

Cat chose that moment to sneak her way into Jonas’s lap, digging her claws into the wool of his trousers. She curled up on his thigh, leaning her face against his stomach, and finally he stilled. He covered her with one of his large hands, not petting her exactly, just blanketing the ball of fuzz with his touch. Jonas breathed through his nose. Cat purred loudly.

“That’s better now, isn’t it?” Frances soothed. “Let’s have a look at the damage.” She removed his hat and tossed it onto her bag. Then she placed

a finger under his chin, lifting it for examination. Touching skin to skin, a new zing of sensation reverberated down her arm.

What was that? Iso demanded.

I . . . I touched him.

Good gods, it about knocked me off the roof . . . Do it again!

“*That . . .*” Jonas said, and a shiver went through him. “Whatever that was, it was interesting.”

“Very.” Her voice cracked. She released him quickly, blood roaring through her ears and heat pooling between her thighs. Her throat bobbed. “Well . . . it doesn’t look as though you need stitches, but I should clean the wounds.”

Jonas rubbed circles in his chest above his heart. “Do what you feel you must. I’m not sure it’s worth it. Cat will just get me again soon.”

“Perhaps you should strive harder not to offend Cat.” Rolling up the sleeves of her blouse, she walked to the taps in the back to ready a bowl of hot water.

“It’s remarkably easy to offend her,” Jonas griped. “She’ll probably take my nose off next time. Look at her, eyeballing me now, the vicious thing.”

Under his hand, Cat snuggled between his fingers, purring loudly.

“That’s nothing another Lunar mage couldn’t fix for you,” Frances shouted over the rush of water. When the bowl was ready, she gathered clean linens and returned to his side. “Are you here because you were hoping I’d take Cat back? I’d consider replacing my engagement present with something less alive, *if* you vowed to give up any future attempts to ‘teach me a lesson’ . . .”

“Fat chance.” Tension remained in his taut shoulders and in the lines around his pursed lips. “I managed to pull myself off the streets and out of poverty because I don’t give up on things, Lady Aaberg. I won’t be starting now.”

She looked him over as she tended to him. Some of the wounds were fresh and quite deep, staining the cloth in spots of crimson. Others were old and starting to scab. “Are you ever going to tell me why it is we needed to talk? Or should I start guessing?”

He met her eyes, his dark brown and gilded near the irises. “In your agreement, you demanded that we secure a bargain between us. A bargain for your assured safety after we wed. I assumed at first you wanted my word in writing—the silly human way—which is why I added certain lines to the engagement documents. But now I suspect you meant a *fae* bargain.”

Frances couldn’t make sense of the displeasure radiating from him. Didn’t he make such magical bargains all the time, and wasn’t he always insisting that the fae knew best? She understood what was at stake should either of them break such an arrangement. Every fae knew.

“That’s what I require,” she confirmed, dabbing at the cuts along his jaw where the scratches were red and angry.

He flinched, but Frances sensed it wasn’t from her treatment. When he spoke next, his words were clipped. “On my life,” he said, and magic warmed the air, a natural fae glamour she felt roving over her skin like smoke, “I vow never to use my strength to intentionally abuse your body, to act against you with violence to cause you harm.”

Frances dropped the linen back into the bowl, freeing her hand. It splashed gently against the rim. “And is there something I should offer in —”

“No,” he said gruffly.

“But don’t you want assurance that—”

“No,” he said, this time more gently. “I’m marrying you because I trust you not to attempt to have me murdered, despite your casual remarks in the past that suggest otherwise.”

“Hmm . . .” Her lips pressed together. He could be stubborn all he wanted. She’d give him her assurances anyway. “On my life, I too vow never to use my strength to intentionally abuse your body, to act against you with violence to cause you harm.” At that, the vow set in place. Frances felt a pressure cinch briefly around her ribs, and she gasped.

She understood bargain magic, having engaged with it one other time in order to make Iso her familiar. It was fueled by the immortal blood and soul of those who partook in the deal. The magic would drain the life force of the one who broke the agreement as penance. A chill raked down her spine.

“That’s done, then,” he said, jaw set. Cat had fallen asleep. She snored in his lap, paws twitching. Scooping the feline into his large palm, he started to stand.

“Don’t move,” Frances said, swishing the wet linen inside her bowl. She wrung it out once. “I haven’t finished treating you.” She pressed the cloth to the side of his face, holding it there for a time, steam swirling up from the compress. His inky lashes lowered. She tapped his cheek with a free finger . . . She wanted to feel it again, the pull of their bond. Another zing went through her arm, thrilling and soothing all at once, and his gaze returned to hers. Her stomach clenched.

His brown eyes lit with interest. “Another question?”

“Why are you acting as mercurial as my engagement present after she’s been denied her master’s hot eels?”

Lips pursed, Jonas shuffled his weight, causing the chair legs to squeak against the tile floors. “You required bargain magic to feel safe with me.”

“Ah,” she said. “This offends your fae honor, I take it?”

“I am many things, but I am not, nor have I ever been, some club-fisted brute capable of beating his wife.” He gave another discontented shift of his shoulders. A muscle jumped in his cheek. “I knew I’d allowed my reputation to sour in the eyes of the public. I had no idea I’d let it fall so low that my partner would believe me capable of hurting her.”

Frances finished cleaning the cuts. “For what it’s worth,” she said, leaving the wet compress to float in the bowl and applying a fresh dry linen to his jaw, “I don’t believe you’d hurt me. Not in this century, anyway.”

Jonas scoffed. “I’ve been the same curmudgeonly old sort since I was a fledgling fae. Still a barbarian, of course, but just not the club-fisted kind. I’m grumpy and particular, but I’ve never been violent unless I was in danger myself. I have a code that’s never going to change. This century or the next. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You can’t promise that. There are many ways to hurt a person without clubbed fists. My father is a very patient man, for example,” she said, checking the dampness of his wounds. “He’s impossibly genteel and kind. At least twice now in our long years together, I’ve made him so flustered I swear even he was contemplating violence. If I can make a man like my father that irate, then it stands to reason I should seek out more practical guarantees than honor alone.”

His laugh was breathy and short. He gave her a lopsided grin that made her knees go to rubber. Something about the tilt of his sarcastic smiles had a disconcertingly profound effect on her.

Frances finished patting his wounds dry in silence. She broke their quiet connection, humping her bowl back to the counter to fetch a salve for his injuries. She set the water and linens aside, found the jar she was looking for, and returned to him, unscrewing the lid. The salve was clear and oily and let off an earthy odor. She applied it generously to the scratches etched in his flesh. The pads of her fingers skated over stubble until his skin gleamed.

The bond rejoiced at that. She felt it surge, her every pore honing in on him. It had been over a year since she'd tended to a mate. She'd forgotten how satisfying it felt to feed that instinct, to nurture it.

"I'm curious . . ." she started.

"So curious today," he said archly.

"Did you send Mr. Ramsey here just to bother me because of what I said about warts, or did you send him here because you wanted to help him?" She smoothed a thicker clump of the salve down the largest of his cuts, a deep gash that extended from the lobe of his ear to his cheek.

"Why does it have to be one thing?" he drawled. "Perhaps I contain multitudes?"

"Perhaps the wicked Bargainer has a heart after all?" She raised a brow at him. "Perhaps he even likes humans more than he lets on?"

Jonas scoffed. "Let's not get carried away, now. But while we're on the subject of not acting like ourselves, were you attempting to cheer me just a moment ago? I'm not accustomed to that from you. You usually look for reasons to shout at me."

Frances wiped her fingers clean on her skirts, shaking her head. “I don’t have to look for reasons to shout at you, Mr. Moen. You provide them for me so readily.” She screwed the lid back on the jar.

“And you’re treating my injuries. Is that a business obligation because you’re a nurse or because we’re partners or . . . ?”

“Or I too contain multitudes.” Frances leaned in closer, studying a nick in the curve of his right horn. It was hard to see against his dark hair. She brushed her thumb over the scratch in the ribbing. “Cat got you here, too. Does it hurt?”

Jonas went very still. “It doesn’t,” he choked.

Frances followed the gash with her touch, reminiscing. “When I was a girl, I wanted a set of horns so badly. My best friend growing up had the cutest little antlers, you see. I never envied the other fae their tails or wings. Those seem impractical. How would I ever get my clothes to fit right? And can you imagine molting? Feathers everywhere.” She paused at the base of the horn, lingering along the rim. Jonas’s hands gripped his knees. “But these, I’ve always found something very . . . tempting about these . . .”

A visible tremor shook him. His eyes slid shut. “Frances,” he breathed.

She remembered herself, stepping back from him, her hand dropping sheepishly to her side. Horns could be quite sensitive, especially when a mate stroked them. The drumbeat of their growing bond thrummed through her body, encouraging her to do more, to explore each of those curves and ridges until he was completely undone. Her lungs hitched. She carried the jar of salve to its place on the counter.

“Apologies,” she said before turning back to him.

“You’ll hear no complaints from me,” he said, his face flushed and his voice huskier than before.

Her eyes fell to the tiles. She’d forgotten herself, forgotten what it was like to tend to a mate. She’d forgotten what it was like to be rejected by one, too. The pain of that memory returned sharply, pricking at the broken piece of her soul.

Her next swallow tasted of ash. “We should get you out of here now. I don’t want Dr. Bandile to think I’ve been courting instead of tending to my duties.”

Jonas recuperated quickly, his color returning to normal. He straightened in his seat, another sarcastic smile filling his cheeks. “For a moment there I thought you’d let your fae side take control for a change. How disappointing that you’re once again pretending to be a good little human.”

Frances leveled him with a glare. “For the last time, Mr. Moen, I *am* human.”

Chapter 5



Lady Aaberg,

Are any of the legends about witches true of you? You can speak honestly. I won't end our engagement either way, but I'd like to know.

Respectfully,

Your Curious Intended

Dear Curious,

You'd marry me even if I ate children like in the fairy stories, or made bone broth from the remains of my past lovers?

Concerned,

Frances

Dear Concerned,

Your past choices in cuisine are no worry of mine. There are a great many tales about witches and their familiar's use of blood magic. I remain innocently intrigued about the subject.

Yes, I would still marry you. I'm more disturbed by your human habits than I am by any of your witchy ones.

*Respectfully,
Jonas*

Jonas,

*You should fear me. As it turns out, I favor the bones of tall,
sarcastic fae men for my broth.*

*Regards,
Frances*

My Dear Witch,

*I'm not afraid. I don't believe for a moment that a privileged
lady of your status has any idea how to make bone broth.*

*Tall and Sarcastically,
Jonas*

*** * ***

Jonas

Jonas was smug all evening about his correspondence with Frances earlier in the day. He enjoyed picturing her face scrunching up in anger as she read his words, imagined her balling up the note and chucking it far from her, her next breath coming in a heavy gasp that made her impressive chest heave.

His intended was so flustered she still hadn't written him back yet. He chuckled to himself, eager for her reply. Cat trailed after him on the walkways, her little white legs a blur beneath her. Both of their bellies were full of salmon from a vendor they favored for their midnight meal.

He remained quite smug until they returned to his offices. Delivery men carted pot after pot of obnoxious smelling flowers into his building. Bright blooms lined the halls, their scent cloying. As he climbed the stairs, pollen caught in his throat and made him cough. The scent was so strong, he was dizzy by the time he reached the workers in his office.

"You there," he barked at the delivery men, eyes watering. Two Unseelie fae—the descendants of shapeshifting tricksters and dragons—hovered near his desk. The workers had bulky muscles and sharp horns. One was bald. The other had scaly skin and wore several metal loops in his pointed ears. "What do you think you're doing here?"

Even Cat was put off by the surprise blooms and the delivery men who wielded them. He'd learned in their week together the feline didn't like changes in their routine any more than he did. She hissed, her fur standing on end. Prowling forward, she made a show of her distaste, meowing loudly, her tail stiff as a post. Were she thirty times larger, she'd make a half-decent guard cat.

The workers wore canvas smocks over stiff-collared shirts. The bald one ignored them both, placing the next pot on the ground near the window before leaving the room to fetch another.

The second Unseelie gave Jonas a bemused smile. "Your lady," he said in the bold accent of the fae from the southern mountains, "your intended, we spoke at the shop an hour ago. Don't worry, she explained everything. We've already charged these to your new account."

“Charged them to *my* new account?” Jonas repeated through his teeth, his blood boiling. He was looking at a small fortune in fresh flowers—disgusting, overwhelming, useless flowers that would be dead in a matter of days. If there was one thing he hated more than flowers, it was waste. The caricature of him and Frances strangling one another came to mind. Suddenly that image seemed like a real possibility, fae bargain be damned.

The Unseelie with the pierced ears crossed to him. He fished a note out of the front of his smock and handed it over.

Jonas took the paper, recognizing the handwriting immediately:

Mr. Moen,

I’m perfectly capable of boiling water! There will be three times this number of blooms at our wedding.

You’re most welcome,

Lady Aaberg

Jonas wadded up the note and considered chucking it out the window or setting it on fire. Confounded, he slipped the wrinkled mess into an inner pocket of his jacket instead. The bond liked it there, tucked over his misbehaving heart.

“How much will it cost me to have these hauled off? *Immediately*,” he asked the worker.

The Unseelie man’s heavy brows furrowed. “You want them removed?”

“All of them,” Jonas said, pinching his nose shut.

“And send them where?”

“Send them to the Row’s hospital, in honor of my engagement. A gift from the Lady of Whiteholm to aid the infirmed,” he said. The quoted price made him cringe, but he agreed to have it added to his ‘account’. It wasn’t as though he couldn’t afford them.

While the men worked, Jonas opened a window to cut through the floral scent. The thickly muscled Unseelie worked quickly. They had most of the flowers gone in half an hour.

Soon there was just one left, a small bouquet of lavender bound with a satin bow, lying on the bureau in the back of his office under an oil painting of the oldest portion of the city and the first ferry systems. The familiar lavender scent made him think of his mate and the perfume she likely added to her bath water. It wasn’t disturbing in the way the other floral scents were. It curled around him, light and airy, soothing. The bond stirred beside his heart.

“Not that one. The lavender can stay,” Jonas told the workers, a growing grin tugging at his mouth. “Now, how much would you need to charge my account if I had you fetch me several buckets full of toads and snails?”

Chapter 6



Dear Future Wife,

One of your considerations requires that I meet your needs for intimacy once. I'm willing to participate daily. However, what are we to do when I travel for work? Am I to make up for lost time when I return, or do you intend to travel with me?

Respectfully,

Confused Intended

Mr. Moen,

That consideration was not meant as once a day. Are you being intentionally dense?

Civilly,

Your Suspicious Betrothed

Dear Suspicious,

My confusion is genuine. If not once a day, then what did you mean? Once a week? Once a month? You couldn't have meant just once a year. We share a growing mate bond. Our physical appetites

are naturally compatible. I certainly need tending to more than once a year and can safely assume that you do as well.

Respectfully,

Jonas

Mr. Moen,

This is a business arrangement. Once means I'll be intimate with you ONE time in order to make our union legal and binding. It's only natural that we will both have appetites that require tending beyond that. I don't expect you to remain celibate. All I ask is that you never bring your lovers to our home. With our growing bond behaving the way it does, I can't be expected to respond rationally if I were ever to be confronted with one of your mistresses. You'll need to attempt at least a modicum of discretion.

Civilly,

Lady Aaberg

My Dear Jealous Mate,

I do not agree. We will need to discuss this consideration more thoroughly. I fail to see why two attractive partners can't tend to each other's needs on occasion if for no other reason than convenience. On this point I remain flummoxed by your decision.

As for your other point, I've never been more thrilled. I must say, jealousy looks very good on you. I'm imagining you now in a possessive bond-induced fae-frenzy, not a single silly human compulsion in sight. How glorious.

Respectfully,

Your Reasonable Intended

* * *

Frances

Iso? *It's time to leave*, Frances said, sending her thoughts to her familiar. She sensed the dragon nearby but couldn't quite tell where she'd landed. The dispensary had been empty and quiet most of the night, her only stress coming from the correspondence she'd received from her stubborn intended. She'd had a restful evening for a change otherwise.

I'm already in the carriage, Iso replied.

Frances started to lock up and was interrupted. A familiar man appeared on the other side of the glass door, wearing a felt hat and fine suit jacket. His skin was dark umber, and his hair was thick, texturized, and as black as the Divine Night herself.

Dr. Bandile.

They smiled at each other. She opened the door for him, the bell chiming above the lintel.

"I caught you," he said merrily, showing his teeth in a friendly grin. "I've meant to for ages, but something kept getting in the way."

"The need to sleep?" she suggested. The physician was a diurnal human, after all.

Dr. Bandile's warm laugh filled the laboratory. He led her to his back office, a dusty cluttered space she'd longed to organize, but the doctor was certain he wouldn't be able to find what he needed if she did.

“Have a seat, my friend,” he encouraged her. “Just for a moment, if you can spare me one. We’ve something to celebrate.”

She moved several medical books off a wooden chair and sat across from him, smoothing down her apron over her dress. Dr. Bandile removed two glass beakers from his desk. Then he fetched a dark bottle of malt liquor off the shelf behind him.

“Oh, the good liquor,” she said playfully.

“The very best for you,” Dr. Bandile said, blowing dust off the bottle and popping the seal on the lid. “We’ve an engagement to drink to.”

Frances laughed at his enthusiasm, overtaken by his good nature. He poured her a glass and handed it to her. She eyed the beaker before accepting it. The numerals on the front were faded by age.

“I’ve conducted no experiments in these,” he vowed, shaking the beaker at her.

She accepted it then, swirling the glass. The sweet smell of barley reminded her of years past, when it was an indulgence her and her father could afford—not the sort of thing a proper human lady was supposed to drink, but one she’d developed a taste for all the same.

She didn’t *always* behave like a perfect human, she thought spitefully, remembering Jonas’s taunts. Thinking of him and his words was something she did far more than she cared to admit.

Dr. Bandile didn’t mind Frances’s non-human habits, thankfully. Though mortal, he had enough fae ancestry he only looked half of his eighty-three years. His hair was without gray, and his face was gently lined. Age would catch up to him, unfortunately, but he was spared from the worst of it for now.

“How is your dragon?” he asked, conversationally.

“She is well.”

“Your father?”

“Excellent as always. You have a standing invitation to take tea with him should you ever awake from a deep slumber with the desire to do so just after midnight.” She sipped from the beaker, the taste sweet and nutty on her tongue.

“And your intended?” This he said with a meaningful look, crossing one leg over the other.

She sucked in her cheeks, poorly restraining a smile, the warmth of the alcohol filtering through her limbs pleasantly. “You’re as bad as the gossips.”

Booming laughter rolled out of him, infectious and kind. “Guilty.”

She told him what she could of the man. Jonas wasn’t particularly loquacious about himself, so there wasn’t much to offer. The doctor choked on his drink when she got to the part about the street man covered in warts and her retribution via flowers.

“It’s a marriage of convenience,” she admitted.

“Shame,” he said. “But perhaps there is a chance for something more in the future. Even the smallest spark can become the largest wildfire.”

Frances bit her lip hard. “We are mates. That makes us compatible as partners, but an arrangement between associates is all I’m interested in. He agrees.” She had a burning question she wanted to ask her mentor but was half worried she wouldn’t like the answer. “I had hoped that becoming engaged would better my reputation in the eyes of the public, and the owner. Has that been the case?”

Lord Thomas Braker owned the dispensary and the apothecary next door. He was also Glen Freest’s uncle and had been quite cross after she

was caught with him. She was supposed to be tending to him, not seducing him. After she was ruined, Dr. Bandile had to pull a great many strings to get Lord Braker to allow her to remain as a “volunteer” when she needed to most.

The physician’s face fell, and her heart went with it. “He’s a very traditional man . . .”

It always made Frances want to snort when humans said that. They spoke of traditions that changed every decade or so. Meanwhile, the fae had true traditions that went back to the dawn of time—an admonishment she’d never admit aloud to Jonas.

She repressed the urge to scoff. “I’m eternally grateful that you intervened on my behalf. I don’t know what we would have done without your donations.”

“I only wish I could accomplish more for you, Frances.” The doctor took a long contemplative swallow of his liquor. “I admit Lord Braker is still quite cross, but he’s been on holiday since the last time we spoke on the matter. I’m hoping that when he returns he’ll be in a better mood.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused you.”

“Don’t be, Frances. You’ve done nothing wrong in my eyes. You know that.”

When Frances started her volunteer work—as an actual volunteer—years ago, nurses weren’t permitted to do more than domestic duties. He’d picked up on her deeper interest in healing and had taught her along the way. For two decades he mentored her. She was deeply grateful for all she’d learned under him.

With a sigh, Dr. Bandile sat his beaker on his desk, a small space not scattered with papers and pamphlets and journals. “If I may be so bold, I’ll

be pleased when Glen Freest gets his comeuppance one day.”

Frances felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. She’d grown accustomed to not letting the image of Glen Freest fill her mind. She stopped it again, and yet the uncomfortable prickle in the still broken parts of her smarted anyway. It wasn’t that she believed she might still love the man. Those feelings had died a painful death long ago, but the wound they left behind was still there and festering. She hurriedly changed the subject, and the good doctor let her.

* * *

It had been lovely catching up with her mentor. Her steps felt a bit lighter as she exited the dispensary.

She felt something then, a pull in the bond, and her boots caught on the stones beneath her feet.

She’d been too distracted to notice earlier. Jonas leaned against a lamppost beside the carriage up the way, eyes hidden in shadow beneath a top hat tipped askew by the curve of his horns. A kaleidoscope of butterflies took flight in her stomach.

Frances tightened her grip on her carpet bag, palms sweating, and continued toward her carriage, hoping she was pulling off an air of tranquility that she didn’t feel in his presence. The bond awoke at his nearness. It stirred in her chest, sharpening her senses. The scent of city smog clung in her nose; the click of her heels on the stones suddenly seemed loud; her breathing went uneven.

“Lady Aaberg,” Jonas purred. His voice, low and thick like molasses, had her heart kicking against her ribs.

“Mr. Moen.” She nodded to him. Crossing to her carriage, she acknowledged the driver with a demure wave, then paused. That wasn’t her driver . . . Though the carriage had looked similar at a distance, it wasn’t hers. The wood and steel paneling favored by the fae had fooled her. Mortal carriages used iron, and iron was poisonous to their kind. She’d mistaken his immortal carriage for her own.

Frances spun to face her intended. “What is this?”

“I sent your carriage home.” The corner of Jonas’s mouth twitched. “I hoped you’d allow me to accompany you this morning.”

But then he didn’t move from his spot, slouched casually against the lamppost, bathed in spring sunlight, dressed like he once again hadn’t tried very hard. He seemed to be waiting on something. Frances was too tired for games. He could follow her, or he could stand there all day for all she cared. She was exhausted, and she was going home.

Frances jerked open the carriage door and gasped.

Chuckling, Jonas ambled over to her side.

She glared up at him. At his full height he was a head taller than her, horns and top hat excluded. “Why is the floor of the cabin covered in dirty shells?”

“Shells?” Jonas frowned. He bent down to look inside. “Well, damn.”

Iso lounged on the cushions of the bench seat, surrounded by empty shells and splotches of mud. She belched out a spark of dragon fire. Wisps of smoke churned out of her nostrils. *Please inform Mr. Moen the snails and toads were delicious I do hope he didn’t intend for me to share them.*

Frances burst out laughing, and the wrinkle in Jonas’s forehead deepened.

“Iso appreciates the meal you provided her, and apologizes if you wanted a taste for yourself,” she said, her shoulders quaking with ill-restrained mirth. “Was that meant for me? Another disturbing lesson you’re trying to teach me?”

“Slippery little dragon,” he grumbled. His lip stuck out in a pout. “I’ll have to keep an eye out for her next time I seek my revenge.”

“There’s no need for a next time. I was firmly hugged by an over-friendly street man covered in warts, and that dreadful caricature is still circulating in the papers. Neither of which has taught me any sort of lesson, other than I’m engaged to a stubborn prig of a man. Why don’t we call a truce before one of us gets overly carried away, eh?”

Jonas widened the opening of the door. “Get in, will you,” he grouched.

Before she could comply, Iso slid sluggishly out into the sunlight.

“Where are you going?” Frances asked her familiar.

I overindulged. Iso flapped her wings and belched another spark. *I need to stretch my legs. See you at home?*

“See you at home,” Frances said.

If you finally get him out of his trousers—

Just go, Frances groaned, her face flushing.

Cackling, Iso took to the skies. Frances shielded her eyes to watch as she rose over the nearest building, red scales gleaming, flying west.

When she was gone, Frances sent Jonas a smug smirk, then slipped inside the cabin. He joined her, sharing her bench seat, his body so close he bathed her in his heat. Her every nerve ending was suddenly deliciously tuned to him. Her next breath stuttered.

“Where’s Cat?” she asked, seeking a more fitting distraction.

He pulled the door shut. “She wouldn’t leave the toads alone, so she had to stay behind. I’d rather not think about what’s she’s doing to my office right now . . .”

Jonas knocked on the roof, and the driver set off. Seated at his side, Frances needed a moment to recover her wits. Apparently, so did he. His lips parted around a heaving exhale. His pupils were shot through.

“Well . . .” Frances said, smoothing wrinkles out of her skirts that weren’t there. “How much longer do you think it’ll be before it’s *less* difficult to share a space? I confess, I’m unfamiliar with a blooming bond that’s this persistent.”

“Gods, I hope soon.” His throat bobbed. “It’s like being thrown off a cliff and wrapped in a warm blanket all at the same time. My heart won’t cooperate at all around you.”

“Yes,” she said earnestly. “Sometimes I think the bond might actually steal the air from my lungs. There’s a panic there, and then another larger part of me simply doesn’t care, like it’d rather suffocate.” It dawned on her then that revenge in the form of snails and toads might not be the only reason for his visit. “You said you wanted to discuss my consideration regarding intimacy,” she prompted.

“I did and I do. But this first.” Jonas fished in his pocket and produced a small square box.

Frances blinked at it. “But that looks like . . .”

“My engagement present wasn’t just the toads and snails.” He frowned down at the empty shells which rattled and rolled together as the carriage bumped over cobblestones. “Admittedly, they were my favorite part of the endeavor.” He opened the box.

Frances sucked the air out of the cabin. Her hand went to her heart. "Divine's blood," she cursed.

"Are proper ladies supposed to use such crass language?" he teased. "I thought not, but what would a barbarian know?"

Her jaw dropped. An oval-cut emerald on an engraved gold band gleamed at her in the small box surrounded by satin.

Chuckling, Jonas held the present closer to her. "Are you just going to gawk at it? Try it on."

"Jonas . . ." she breathed. "It's . . ."

"The most stunning piece in the Lunar Province, according to the jeweler. Granted, he probably says that about all of his pieces. I got a very reasonable price for it, and you'll be happy to know I didn't even need to extort anyone to do it."

Frances plucked it out of the box, slightly ashamed that at the moment she didn't much care how he got it. The weight was a surprise. The stone was heavy. It caught the sunlight pouring in through the windows around the cabin curtains and glittered forest green. "Oh, the jeweler was right . . . this is . . . I'm speechless."

A self-satisfied laugh rumbled out of his chest. "Well, put it on then. I'd like to see it where it belongs."

Frances slid it on her ring finger. It fit a bit loosely, but if he suggested having it resized, she planned to hiss at him more severely than Cat ever had. This stone was lovely, and after enduring a rather ghastly engagement, she'd earned it. This was *hers* now.

She held her left hand out so they could inspect it together. "It's . . . stars above, it's gorgeous!"

"You look like a properly engaged woman," Jonas said.

Lost in thought, Frances toyed with the band, turning it around on her finger. The metal cooled her skin. “I’m curious, the emerald—oh, but symbolic rings are a mortal custom. You wouldn’t give the stone a meaning.” With a playful chuckle, she nudged the toe of her shoe at the shells on the floor. “Unless of course you went with emerald to match the toads?”

“No.” He stared pointedly into her eyes, and her next inhale filled her chest and caught there. “That wasn’t the green I had in mind.” A black curl had broken free from its pins, framing her face. Delicately, he brushed it behind the point of her ear.

Frances bit her lip, lashes lowering. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Now,” he said, straightening against the bench seat, “about this nonsense consideration of yours . . .”

She heaved a sigh. “Well, there goes the warm moment.”

“You can’t honestly expect me to—”

“Yes, I can,” she snapped.

“Sharing a bed only once isn’t a marriage,” he fired back. “You’re already depriving me of company while I sleep, insisting on a room all to yourself.”

“It’s a business transaction.”

Jonas’s hands fell to his sides, his fingers digging into the cushion. “A business transaction is what they do on Main Street at the Gilded Boot and every other brothel in the Row. What we’re to have is a partnership. We’re to take care of each other.”

“What you’re to have is a title, my ancestral home, and me—*once*,” she jeered. It shouldn’t surprise her that he’d dare to compare her to a courtesan. That was just the sort of thing the wicked Bargainer would do.

Heat flared in her chest and rose, burning up her cheeks. Even the points of her ears went hot. “In exchange, I gain access to your wealth to save my family from ruin and keep another family I care about gainfully employed. That’s a transaction, Mr. Moen. A fair one.”

“You think satisfying our needs elsewhere is a solution, but I assure you—”

“You wanted to make this a business arrangement just as much as I did! And while you may have *loads* of practice separating emotional attachments from intimacy, I *don’t*!”

“This is no solution. Nothing but trouble will come from stepping out regularly in such a fashion!”

Their shouting voices filled the cabin.

“It’s not stepping out if you have my permission!”

“I don’t want your permission, and I don’t want you sharing someone else’s bed while you’re avoiding mine,” he roared. “What will all your precious humans think? How are you to ever escape the title of Wanton Witch of Whiteholm if—”

“Mock me all you wish! It was abandoning my customs that got me—”

“Don’t quote human nonsense—”

“—that got me ruined! I could have spared myself the scandal and your extortion if I’d just followed the godsdamned rules!”

He waved her words away, the gesture so dismissive she ground her teeth. “Humans treated you like yesterday’s rubbish. The fae never would have cast you out in such a fashion.”

“It was a fae trickster who stole from us, and it was the fae who set upon my father like vultures the moment he was in need. Vultures like *you*.” Her hand went to her neck again, grasping for the phantom of a

charm that was no longer there. He'd taken it, and her family's wealth with it. "It's the fae who sees weakness as an invitation for injury. I admit that certain human expectations are at times unfair, but—"

"Ha!" Jonas's sardonic laughter cut through her.

Frances realized there was another truth she needed to impart to her betrothed, something she thought he already understood, but now wasn't so sure. It was the same shocking truth that had ended her relationship with her last mate. Glen had promptly stopped writing to her after she explained it to him. A truth she had hoped not to discuss at all, because she thought Jonas wanted the same thing she did. However, he wasn't currently acting like a man who wanted *just* a business arrangement.

During the argument, they'd drawn closer, his thigh pressed to hers. They faced each other then, squaring off, her chest heaving, their panting breaths turning the cabin balmy. His lips parted and she prepared for the next verbal blow, wincing expectantly. But then his mouth closed.

Slowly, Jonas lowered his brow, leveling her with a scowl. Whatever he'd meant to say, something was different. A flip had switched, turning the flames of their fury into something else entirely.

He drew nearer, his breath fanning her cheek. "Glen Freest is a fucking idiot."

Chapter 7



Jonas

Jonas braced himself, ready for Frances to lob another insult. Instead, her lips crashed against his with such force his top hat flopped off his head. Shock put him on full alert, and then her warm touch registered and his eyes slid shut. Every nerve ending in his body came alive at the contact. The connection between them crackled under his skin, tightening his muscles. Her mouth was hot and dry, the kiss full of passion and anger—so much anger she was still grumbling against his lips. He grunted back at her.

She wasn't done fighting, apparently.

He was, however.

He took her in his arms, crushing her lush body against the hard plane of his chest. She melted there with a resigned sigh. Her lips softened. A breath raked across his cheek, and her next kiss was feather-light, an invitation.

His tongue teased inside her mouth, plundering it, drawing out her gasp. Her hands fisted in his waistcoat, his ring gleaming on her finger. Jonas crushed shells under his boots without a care to spare for them. She clung to him, catching his bottom lip between her teeth and suckling. Then with a moan full of longing and agitation, she bit down.

His eyes rolled back in his head, and his cock jerked against the fall front of his trousers. The bond reverberated through his core. He felt her vigor and the sharp edges of her frustration in their connection. He palmed the nape of her neck, anchoring her to him. Frances tasted like barley and sweetness. She smelled like an intoxicating mixture of honey and lavender water and mate. His mate.

He was so hard he ached. His hands roamed down the sides of her body hungrily. Tongue caressing hers, he filled his palms with her tempting curves, cupping her hips and her waist.

Jonas hardly recognized the woman in his arms. Where had the proper little human gone? She was a savage fae now, tasting and taking what she wanted, squeezing herself closer to him. The little sounds she made were more animal than woman.

He wanted to draw them all out of her, to make her writhe and beg, to feel her softness squirming against his length. He hated the satin and wool that separated them. Jonas wanted skin, wanted to rip her bodice open, bare her breasts, and take them in his mouth.

But when he tried to pull her into his lap, she laid a hand on his chest and pushed him back. He released her reluctantly, his gaze searching her face. Her lashes were down, cheeks a brilliant shade of rose red.

Jonas tasted copper and realized she'd bitten him hard enough to draw blood. He licked his swollen lip and found the small cut her teeth had made.

Frances put herself back together slowly, straightening her bodice, patting down her hair, smoothing her skirts. Her kiss had buried his brain in a lusty fog he couldn't find his way out of. His mind was a labyrinth.

She hugged her middle, closing in on herself. “Jonas, if you’ve changed your mind about wanting a love match, if in your heart of hearts you’re hoping our partnership will turn into a proper fae marriage, then you need to understand something. Not only am I half-human, but I broke off a piece of my weaker soul and shared it with another, and there were consequences for that choice.” She stared down at the tops of her knees, sinking further into herself. “I’m not ever going to be able to complete the bond with you. I’m not ever going to be your true mate, no matter how hard our blooming connection pulls at us. My soul isn’t intact. I damaged it. Do you understand? I can’t put into words the pain and panic my soul causes me when I try to embrace the bond. I’m not ever going to be able to do that for anyone.”

Her words struck him speechless. He gaped at her, feeling like a fool. “How can you be so certain that it’s impossible?”

“Because I tried once. I couldn’t. I couldn’t complete the bond,” she said softly, her voice breaking. “This is it. This is all there will ever be between us.”

Some emotion passed over her face, an emotion he wanted to rid her of.

“I don’t want a love match,” he said quickly. *I just want you.* Whatever else came of it, he didn’t care. He wanted the title, needed the estate, and now his instincts wanted Frances, too.

And he wouldn’t be denied.

“Are you *sure*, Jonas?” Her eyes pleaded with him, begged him to understand her.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t want romance—I don’t lie. I knew your soul was broken before we made this agreement.” That was true,

though he'd never thought through the ramifications of that until now—never cared to think much on it at all.

“Jonas—”

“Nothing has changed.” As he spoke the words, he couldn't be certain if they were honest or not. He knew only that he wanted her to stop looking at him like the sky was falling.

She pulled aside the window curtain, examining the road. Traffic was light on the walkways. Another carriage thundered by headed the opposite direction. “If you change your mind about what you want, please notify me by letter, at least. My last mate didn't bother. That's a pain I don't wish to repeat.”

“I'm not going to change my mind,” he huffed. “I'm not going to abandon you or our agreement.”

“Good.” Frances knocked three times on the roof.

“What are you doing?”

“Walking home,” she said, an edge in her voice that discouraged him from challenging her. “I need to clear my head. The humans won't approve of me walking alone. You should be proud. Look at me, thwarting mortal proprieties.”

The carriage pulled to the side and came to a stop on a corner street.

She turned to him, briefly meeting his eyes. Her hazel gaze was glassy. “I suggest you take advantage of our current location. Then you'll see that I'm right about this. My consideration regarding intimacy is preferable for both of us and is the best way to preserve our business partnership.”

Jonas had a retort ready on his tongue, but she flung open the door and clambered out before he could fire it at her.

Her father, the earl, was right. Frances was so stubborn he'd have better luck convincing a duck not to quack than getting her to lower her resolve. He followed her out of the carriage anyway. Before he found his footing, she was already speed-walking down the street in the direction of Westarow.

He entertained the idea of chasing after her and realized the bond was egging him on more than he liked, kicking up his pulse. He might end up tossing her over his shoulder at the first sign of continued defiance if he pursued her now. He could have gotten away with that a century ago, but the King of Night had enacted strict rules about such things. Now acting on instinct in such a fashion could get a man arrested and put in irons.

Jonas found his bearings instead, inhaling sharply through his nose, ignoring the incessant tug of his instincts. *Go to her*, the bond shouted at him. His carriage had stopped on Main Street. Up the road from the theater was the Gilded Boot, the brothel he'd mentioned during their argument. He understood her words now when she'd encouraged him to take advantage of their surroundings.

But Jonas didn't have an appetite for company—other company. The blooming bond wanted him to get lost in his mate, not a pretty courtesan. It flustered him that Frances was making physical intimacy more complicated than it had to be.

What harm could some much-needed passionate rutting do to ruin their agreement? Regular orgasms would surely make them both easier to live with.

He cast another glance after Frances. She was already gone. That was for the best, he told himself.

He didn't believe his own words for one lousy second . . .

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he found a stone to kick as he strolled up the street, toward the Gilded Boot. He didn't want the services of a courtesan, but he was overdue for a stiff drink, and he craved conversation from a familiar face who knew the importance of discretion.

The Gilded Boot was a sizable brothel house with an elaborate archway flanked in spiral pillars. The plaque beside the doors advertised that the home was licensed to Miss Susan Boots—a surname he knew to be fake—and was a house of entertainment, which was code for ill repute.

He had to open the door himself. Usually, two footmen in matching uniforms tended to that. A short entryway led to a large parlor that was clean and welcoming—free of disturbing floral arrangements—but, surprisingly, nearly empty. Even at this early hour, that was strange.

Susan, the mortal madam of the house, served behind the bar, dressed in velvet finery. It was odd to see her there. She had workers doing that for her now, he'd thought. Jewels wrapped her neck and sparkled from her ears, and pearls adorned her golden hair, so surely coin wasn't a problem. He'd known Susan for a great while by human standards. They'd both gotten their start on Dimmet Street, her as a barmaid in a tavern and him as a pawnbroker.

Every relationship Jonas had ever had came with an expiration period. His friendship with Susan managed not to run its course when he came into his success like it had for everyone else, so when she smiled at him, he returned it with warmth. They'd been good to each other on Dimmet Street, an area of the Row full of desperation and danger. They'd exchanged information on the businesses coming and going, always warning the other when the violent sort came sniffing about or a certain

constable needed bribing. He hadn't visited The Gilded Boot in a while, but it was refreshing to be in her reliable presence again.

He joined Susan at the bar, and her grin went askew. "If it's company you want, I'm afraid I gave the girls the next few nights off. We had a scare yesterday, but I'm still serving drinks if you're interested."

There was only one other man in the parlor, an older human, seated at the opposite end of the bar, nursing a beer. On the side wall behind him was a chalkboard with pricing for drinks and a poem about a buxom barmaid.

"A scare?" Jonas asked. The Gilded Boot had friends in high places now—very high places. It was well known that Susan and her business partner, Margot, were close to the Bloody Queen of Night herself.

Susan lowered her voice. "Some fool robbed us, if you can believe that."

Jonas choked on a laugh. "Absolute madness. Gods, what desperate soul would dare such a thing here of all places?"

Susan's returning chortle was full of malice. "It's being taken care of, and now my workers are enjoying a much-needed break. What would you like to drink?"

"Beer." Jonas perched on the nearest bar stool. "A tall one, please."

Susan winked at him as she readied his drink, removing a glass from out of an ice box kept below the bar. "First one's on the house. You look like you need it." She slid it to him across the varnished surface.

The glass was chilled, the smell of barley a comfort to him, but instead of drinking it, he played a finger through the condensation. His misbehaving mind returned to Frances against his wishes.

Why did he care so damn much? He chided himself. If she was comfortable giving him the title, a fae lord's home, and permission to secure his own contentedness, what did it matter what company she kept? What did it matter if they could never fully bond? His more reasonable thoughts warred with his feelings, struggling to make sense of them.

And then the doors opened and the man at the end of the bar did a doubletake before he startled out of his seat, knocking his stool over. On high alert, Jonas stood to get a better look at who had arrived. He kept a smaller dagger in his left boot, a habit he'd picked up from life on Dimmet Street. He reached for it instinctively, then stopped himself.

A short fae woman entered, her head covered, her body cloaked in soft elven leather—a Seelie woman. White hair peeked out from under her hood.

A Seelie *witch*, he corrected, catching sight of the demon familiar in the form of a black cat that trailed her steps. The scent of hell—sulfur—followed them into the parlor. Tripping over himself, the mortal man sprinted out of the brothel. Jonas didn't blame him for behaving so outlandishly. Even he was intimidated. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck rose. His fingers twitched, longing for the dagger in his boot.

He'd caught a glimpse of the Bloody Queen of Night one other time. It had been enough to satisfy his curiosity that the rumors about the legendary witch were indeed true. Jonas squeezed his glass as she strode to the bar.

Susan greeted her warmly.

The queen of the Lunar Court leaned in close, her words too hushed to be heard at a distance even by keen ears. Dressed as a warrior of old, she didn't look like royalty, but there was something regal about her, all the

same. She had the silent-footed grace of a woman who belonged on a throne.

“Are you certain that’s necessary?” he heard Susan say.

The demon cat turned bright yellow eyes on Jonas, and he hunkered down on his stool, certain he didn’t want their attention if he could help it. He had to remind himself twice that he was a friend here and allowed to be present, or he might have made a fool of himself like the frightened mortal had. Under the scrutiny of that demonic gaze, he felt like he was being investigated for his every wrongdoing . . .

And the list of his many indiscretions was rather long indeed.

Susan and the queen came to some quiet agreement. Susan fetched a large wooden nail and a hammer from under the bar. The queen took them from her in small slender hands—hands that shouldn’t have been as terrifying as they were, yet there Jonas sat, sweating through his waistcoat. The movement shifted her cloak. A series of daggers that made the one he hid in his boot look like a butter knife hung from her hip beside a hunter’s satchel, and his unease grew.

The queen produced a large purse from the satchel. Jonas noted the bloodstains on it and swallowed hard.

“Thank you, Rain.” Susan took it carefully between two fingers, her nose wrinkling.

The queen returned to the doors. Jonas watched as Susan revealed a safe behind an oil painting of an ocean view, beside the shelves of alcohol. She stowed away the full purse of coins. The sudden sound of hammering nearly scared Jonas out of his skin. His eyes jerked back to the entrance.

The Bloody Queen of Night nailed a severed hand, a fresh one, to the front door. In the blood that dripped from the stump she wrote the word

“thief” beneath it in an archaic script, using letters that had fallen out of use centuries ago, but the message was clear enough. Finished, she let the doors close. She returned the hammer to the bar and waved farewell to the madam. The demon familiar never left the queen’s side, following her out into the morning sunlight.

“Divine’s blood,” Jonas cursed under his breath.

“She has that effect on people,” Susan said, and Jonas jumped. “Ha, sorry. Didn’t mean to sneak up on you.”

He chuckled uneasily. “A severed hand ought to discourage any repeat attempts to rob you for a good long while.”

Susan’s blue eyes wrinkled at the corners. “The queen insists it’s a message the fae will need to see. I think the rumors will be enough. By next week it’ll be a severed head full of gold crescents that she gave me, but she’s probably right about the fae. She usually is. Whatever keeps my workers safe, I say.” Then she squinted at him. “You haven’t even had a sip of that beer yet. Was the queen’s visit so unnerving, or have you got something else weighing on your mind?”

“Both,” he admitted, creating another streak through the condensation on his glass.

Her mouth curved up knowingly. She leaned an elbow on the bar. “Would it have anything to do with the Lady of Whiteholm? Your *intended*? Margot and I have a bet going. She says the engagement announced in the papers is true. After you put up that caricature, I wagered it was fake, a joke to stir up trouble, or perhaps it has something to do with one of your bargains?”

His heart pinched as it hit him: the reason why he cared so much about who Frances shared her bed with. In many ways, what they had was a fake

engagement, a farce. *A business arrangement.*

But he didn't want that anymore. He wanted something else. Exactly what that meant and what that looked like, he wasn't sure. His lips burned, the phantom of her kisses lingering there.

He wanted more of *that*. Her kisses. Even the angry ones—especially the angry ones.

"It's real," he said determinedly.

* * *

~~Frances,~~

~~I can't stop thinking about your lips on mine.~~

At dusk the next evening, seated behind his desk, Jonas threw his third attempt at writing to Frances away. He remained determined to turn their engagement into something more than a business arrangement, but given how resistant his mate was, he suspected subtlety was needed. Yes, he still craved a title, and he hadn't let go of what motivated him most. Profits pushed him. He'd never again be at risk of going without. Next year he planned to be the newest member of the finest club in River Row where big business decisions were often made by fae lords who wielded the most power in the Lunar Province. He wouldn't let go of his plans, but . . .

Now he wanted something more on top of all that, and he wouldn't be denied.

Dear Frances,

Will you marry me?

Awaiting your answer with bated breath,

Jonas

Jonas,

I'm confused by the question. Documents have been signed. There's a ring on my finger—a very large, very expensive ring, in fact. An announcement has been made in the papers. Are you being thick on purpose again?

Sincerely,

Frances

Frances,

I have abided by all of your human customs. In doing so, I ignored mine. Fae honor dictates that I have your word that this is what you want. Me, as your husband. You as my wife. I need to hear the words. What say you?

Still Waiting,

Jonas

Jonas,

You are cold and rude. Your history of extortion is most unbecoming. You are more condescending than any cat, as untrustworthy as any trickster before you. Any woman would be an utter fool to enter into an agreement with you. In a word, sir, you are an ass.

And yes, I will marry you. Because you contain multitudes.

*Waiting for the punchline,
Still Your Betrothed*

* * *

The following week, Jonas carried Cat down to his secretary's office on the first floor nearest the front doors. Sunset cast the streets outside in purple. Lamplighters littered the walkways.

Cat was hungry, but Jonas had an important meeting to attend soon. The railyard deal he'd been working toward for most of the season was now finally coming to a head. He'd been brokering deals between metal traders and work crews to the point of exhaustion, functioning on little sleep because the owner was a diurnal human, but the seller was finally ready.

Jonas's Seelie secretary had silver hair, tall ears, and a short, stocky build. He greeted Jonas with a nod and a polite, "Sir."

"Cat requires nourishment before you head home this evening." He fished in his pockets and produced a gold crescent. "Feed her well and walk with her. My meeting should conclude in the next hour or two. Keep the change for your troubles."

Fergus, his secretary, pocketed the generous coin and took the cat, a grin breaking out across his clean-shaven face. "There's a good kitty," he said in the lilting accent of the northern fae provinces. "I know just the place with the best dried salmon in all the Row."

"*Dried* salmon?" Jonas frowned and took Cat back from Fergus. Cat yowled, and he soothed her, smoothing down the snowy fluff between her

ears. “The foolish man didn’t mean it,” Jonas said, cradling her in his palm. “He’ll get you *fresh* salmon from the vendor up the street and a hot eel. Use the woman vendor. Cat tolerates you and me, but as a rule she doesn’t seem to like men. And none of that dried rubbish.”

Fergus recoiled under his glare. “Of course, sir. Fresh salmon.”

Reluctantly, Jonas returned Cat to his secretary. Fergus’s silly smile reappeared.

Then the doors parted, drawing Jonas’s gaze to the entrance. Frances was there, clutching her carpet bag sheepishly between her twitching hands. Her eyes were glossy, and her lower lip trembled. He waited a moment for her to speak, but she hovered by the entryway instead, her shoulders slumped.

“Fergus,” Jonas said, his heart leaping into his throat, “take care of Cat. Cancel my meeting.”

“But, sir,” his secretary spluttered, “that’ll set things back. It could take ages to get everyone to table—”

“Cancel the damn meeting,” Jonas said more firmly, and Fergus’s next protest caught in his throat.

“Course, sir,” the secretary muttered.

Jonas fitted his hands in his pockets and strolled toward his future bride, searching her body for clues as to why her hazel eyes were red-rimmed and welling. He found no visible signs of injury.

Digging in his pocket, his fingers found her last note, the one where she’d accepted his proposal *because he contained multitudes*. It was the first time she’d admitted to liking something about him. He’d kept it with him all week.

As he reached her, he squeezed the parchment as though it were charmed. “Frances?”

She greeted him with a watery smile. “Can we talk in private?”

“Of course.” Jonas gestured toward the stairs. Realizing she’d never been in his building before, he laid a gentle hand on her back and guided her. “Are you hurt?” he whispered in her ear.

“No,” she managed. Her voice was small.

“Your father? He’s well?”

“He’s fine.” The heels of her boots clicked against the hardwood steps.

“Your favorite humans? They’re all intact I hope?” he asked, studying the side of her face.

She sniffled, running a gloved hand under her nose. “They’re fine for now . . .”

Jonas led her into his office. The moment he secured the door, Frances burst into loud tears. His heart plummeted into his boots at the pitiful sound.

“Frances,” he gasped, reaching for her.

She turned away from him, ashamed, burying her face in her hands.

He rubbed at his chin, confounded. “Sacred stars above, if this is something I’ve said or done—”

“No,” she blubbered. “Not you.”

“Well, damn.” Jonas paced in a tight circle, running a hand through his long hair, mussing it around his horns. It felt like his heart wanted to leave his boots. It was trying to wrench its way right out of his body. “Frances, give me your anger, your irritation, your malice. I’d rather you hurled insults or fists at me, just please don’t fucking cry.”

“I can’t help it,” she whimpered, wiping her cheeks futilely. A fresh river ran down her face. The wetness gathered on her trembling chin and dripped down her dress.

She was still wearing an apron over her clothing. Her dark hair was pinned up but with no bonnet or fancy adornments. She’d come to him from the dispensary, then, and in a hurry from the look of her. She’d forgotten to leave the apron.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

Frances set down her carpet bag on the floor. The fabric shifted, and then Iso’s long scaled tail appeared, a handkerchief coiled in it. “Th-thank you, Iso,” She bent low to take it, blotting at her cheeks.

Damn. Jonas was indeed an ass. He could have at least fetched her a blasted handkerchief, instead of standing there squeezing the note in his pocket harder and harder, being useless.

“If someone’s hurt you,” he growled, “I’ve decided I’m going to ruin them and then murder them very, very slowly . . .”

Frances’s laugh was short-lived, but it brightened her paling face to its usual pink. She wiped at her eyes futilely. Iso’s ruddy tail returned, offering up her spectacles, then blue yarn and knitting needles. She took them in the crook of her arm, carrying each to the billowy chair nearest the fireplace. On unsteady legs, she collapsed into the furniture in a miserable heap.

The ball of yarn dropped from her lap and rolled away. Jonas fetched it for her.

It was a warm spring evening. The fireplace remained cold. He considered stirring up a fresh blaze just for something to busy his hands. Instead, he hovered over her, watching as she worked yarn out of the ball

with fingers that shook. She readied her wooden needles. He couldn't make out what it was she was attempting to knit. Something large and rectangular hung off one of the long tools.

Jonas let her work for a time. Slowly her hands stopped shaking. Her little square spectacles perched on her nose made her seem smaller, more vulnerable. A tear slid free from the corner of her eye, magnified through the lens.

"Frances," he said calmly, "if you don't tell me what has you so upset, I think my head might burst."

Her laugh was full-bodied, rich and vibrant. The sound of it helped ease his heart back into his body. "Apologies," she said, "I'm still processing it all, I think."

She set her work aside, removed her spectacles, wiped her eyes one last time, and stood before him. Then her chin tremored, and the corners of her mouth turned down. Without warning, she stepped between his arms, hiding her face in his chest. Her tears returned with vigor.

Jonas blinked down at her raven head, baffled. "What's happened now? You were better there for a moment, I thought."

Frances took his arms and fitted them around her, encouraging him to embrace her. "Lord Braker returned from his holiday, heard the news of our engagement, and gave the order that I'm not to be seen at the dispensary ever again."

"Oh . . ." He patted the top of her head awkwardly. "There, there."

"It's dreadful," she said, exasperated. Her wet cheek left a damp spot on his shirt.

Jonas tightened his arms around her, squeezing a sigh out of her. "I know how you like to help the humans."

“It wasn’t just that,” she confessed, drying her eyes with the back of her hands. “It was my job.”

“I thought you were a volunteer?”

“Dr. Bandile paid me in secret. I used his donations to pad my depleting dowry. At the rate the estates were losing money to wages, we just couldn’t keep up without it.”

“I see.” The more firmly he held her, the more the words seemed to pour out of her freely. He secured her to him, a hand on her back and the other in her hair.

“Lord Braker is a relation to Glen Freest. His uncle.” She studied the buttons on his lapel as she spoke, like there was an equation to be solved between them. “Glen is my former—”

“I know who the idiot is,” he grumbled.

“Right. Of course.” Frances dropped her brow against his chest in defeat. “Lord Braker wanted me gone after I was ruined by my own impulsiveness, which made everything worse.”

“Since you’ve brought it up, I’ve often wondered—”

“Nearly a year ago now, Glen’s family walked into the dispensary and caught me kissing him in his medical bed,” she said, guessing correctly where his question was headed. “He was recovering from iron poisoning, hospital was full again, and he needed more care than could be provided at home. Dr. Bandile agreed to keep him at the dispensary. I kept a vigil at night over him while the doctor tended to him during the day. Caring for him increased the blooming bond growing between us. When he got better . . . I grew braver . . .”

“A kiss? That can’t be all. Were you not clothed?”

Her next laugh left her lips in a gust. “I was fully clothed.”

He lifted a brow at her suggestively. "Then were you kissing him someplace more interesting than his lips?"

"I was kissing his mouth," she said, voice wobbling with amusement. "And he was kissing me back, which everyone seems to forget, but it doesn't take much to scandalize humans."

Jonas blinked away his surprise. "But then, was *he* clothed?"

"Afraid so," she groaned. "I didn't even get to enjoy properly earning my terrible reputation. In their defense, he was recovered and already conveniently abed. We weren't going to stay clothed for much longer. . ."

"Labeled wanton all because of a blasted kiss?" He shook his head. "*Humans.*"

Frances continued, "Then more gossip was stirred up after Glen returned home. Lord Braker has never been comfortable letting a witch linger about. At the insistence of Glen and Dr. Bandile, the lord allowed me to stay and serve at the dispensary. Then my engagement to you was announced, and Glen withdrew his objections to giving me the sack."

"Pitiful little man," Jonas said.

She straightened, rubbing futilely at the wet spot on his chest, trying to dry it. "Thank you . . . I'm sorry I came here like this. I hope I haven't disrupted your night too horribly much. Dr. Bandile just gave me the news, and I didn't know where to go. Now I don't know what to do."

"With all your free time, you mean? Read a book. Knit to your heart's content. Take your dragon for a walk," he teased. "Help me plot ways to ruin Lord Braker. I hear he's a gambling man. I'm sure I can do something with that. It's always more fun ruining people when they deserve it."

Frances gave him another watery smile. "We won't last long with what's left, Jonas."

“On your dowry, you mean?” His brow furrowed.

She nodded impishly. “Another month or two, maybe?”

“Frances, don’t take this as an insult to your intelligence, but you *do* realize you’re about to marry the wealthiest man in the Lunar Province, yes? You could fund your father’s estates and buy the medical dispensary outright if you wanted to. You could buy *ten* dispensaries if you wished. In fact, I encourage it as long as it keeps your eyes dry.”

Her sigh warmed the wet spot on his waistcoat. “Of course, I know you’re wealthy, but we’re not set to be married for—”

“Hang all that. I didn’t want a long engagement anyway. Human customs be damned, I say.”

“It isn’t just about propriety. I had hoped I’d have time to begin updates on Whiteholm to make it a bit more livable.” She winced up at him. “Now everything is ruined, all my careful plans.”

Jonas released her with a frown. “Livable how?”

Frances shrugged coyly, her cheeks turning a darker shade of pink. “Cosmetics mostly.” Then her lip went briefly between her teeth. “And plumbing.”

Jonas’s eyes went wide. “There are things about the past I miss, Frances,” he grouched. “Pissing in a pot isn’t ever going to be one of those things. You mean to tell me that Whiteholm doesn’t have pipes?”

“Or a boiler,” she confessed, her lip back between her teeth. “It’s less common in country homes.”

Jonas cursed colorfully. “No need to worry about how you’ll be filling your time, then. You’ve work to do, Lady Aaberg. I’ll meet with your father tonight and see that you have the funding you need. Then I insist you go to Whiteholm immediately. Bring your small army of humans with

you if you must and . . .” Jonas paused. His next thought made his heart misbehave.

She peered up at him expectantly through her dark damp lashes.

“Go make us a home.”

Chapter 8



Dear Wanton Lips of Whiteholm,

My last efforts to help you see reason regarding your consideration toward intimacy failed. I have a new compromise in mind. First, that we do not put your insistence on coming together only the once as husband and wife in writing so that, should you change your mind, you are free to do so without breaching our agreement.

Secondly, in exchange for giving up my fondness for sleeping beside another person on the regular, and ongoing copulation in the bedroom, I insist that other forms of affection not be restricted. A man should be permitted to kiss his wife should the desire strike him. I've held and kissed you before. Neither act has ruined the integrity of our arrangement.

We will be married a very long time. Whatever the state of your damaged soul, if we allow room for affection, perhaps this partnership could become a friendship.

Jonas

Jonas,

Why are you so fond of sleeping beside another? I might be the worst bedmate imaginable. Perhaps I snore or hog the blankets? And what if I'm not in the mood for my husband to kiss me?

Admittedly, I'm not opposed to friendship.

The Wanton Lips of Whiteholm

Bride-to-Be,

Sleeping alone is dull. I prefer to share my bed with a warm body full of soft curves to press against. I won't notice if you snore because of how heavily I sleep, and no one hogs a bed more than I do. If you're not in the mood for kissing, I'll take your wishes into account on an ongoing basis, but I want the option of affection to remain firmly on the table.

Civilly,

Jonas

Dear Barbarian,

It's probable that some affection now could make coming together the once in the near future a bit more comfortable for us both. I can't see any harm in various forms of affection as long as I'm given a say in it and I'm permitted to retreat to my own room as I wish.

Is all this talk about "curves pressed against your body" just your barbaric way of saying you like to snuggle?

Amused,

Frances

Bride-to-Be,

If you think I'm embarrassed to admit aloud that I enjoy cuddling, well then—you're correct. I entrust my secrets to your safekeeping.

Your discretion is required. I'm adding it to the agreement.

Jonas

* * *

Frances

Frances took Jonas's words quite literally when he suggested she move an army of humans to Whiteholm. The Archer family was sizable indeed, and thanks to generations of domestic services, they covered a wide variety of talents, including some skilled labor.

After three weeks of updating the manor, Frances had to admit that plumbing probably wasn't one of those talents. Jonas's letters filtered in regularly, with Iso providing mail service. A proper master builder was hired, and the main house turned into a cacophony of hammering and soldering and sawdust overnight.

The activity invigorated Frances, but poor Iso seemed more and more depleted lately. The familiar gave a number of excuses, indicating the loud noises and late hours as the cause. Frances concocted a plan to raise her spirits, one she'd been working on daily in Iso's absence while she played delivery-dragon.

Her familiar returned that night, an hour after sunset. Frances received her at the main entrance. They'd set up new altars to flank the entryway to honor the Divine Day and the Divine Night. Two footmen, Archer brothers Braydon and Branson, held the doors open for Iso, showering the threshold in crisp spring air and starlight.

The dragon landed on the night altar, a metal pillar with a symbol for the moon on its front, and she lit the incense with a huff of dragon breath, filling the foyer with the scent of brimstone, spices, and the Night Mother's blessing.

"I have a surprise for you," Frances said mischievously.

Iso's diamond-shaped head lifted. *What sort of surprise?* Her barbed tongue flicked out excitedly.

Frances gestured for her to follow. Iso glided from the altar to her shoulder and perched there, claws pricking gently at the taffeta sleeve of her dress. Her scaled tail hung affectionately along the back of her mistress's neck.

Frances hefted her down a winding corridor, past the drawing room. The bottom half of the halls were newly restored paneled wood, the top half, blue floral wallpaper, freshly applied.

Will I like the way this surprise tastes? Iso guessed.

"You'll have to wait and see." Frances picked up her pace, just as eager as her familiar.

Or perhaps I'll like the way my surprise's thighs look in their britches?

Laughter burst from Frances's lips, and her steps momentarily faltered. "I hate to disappoint you, darling, but your surprise doesn't have thighs or britches."

Frances pushed open two stained-glass doors, revealing a small conservatory with earthen floors, tidy beds of roses, and two large water gardens.

Oh, Iso exclaimed.

Frances laced her fingers together eagerly. “I know it’s not a proper dragon hoard, but I thought you might make do with this.”

Oh, oh . . . The little dragon took flight, gliding about the room of plated glass and metal turned green with age. *Look at the toads!*

Startled by her fluttering wings overhead, toads leapt for cover in the water gardens.

Frances smiled, watching Iso dip and weave in the air, taking it all in. “Do you like it?”

I have a hoard like a real dragon! Iso cheered. *Of course I love it!*

Frances ducked as Iso sailed by. “You *are* a real dragon.”

I’m just a runt of a dragon, Iso said. Then she shouted gleefully, *But now I have a hoard!*

Admittedly, Frances knew very little about the Unseelie creatures that lived in the Mountain Court to the south. According to legend, dragons were powerful tricksters, able to magically change their form. But Iso had very little blood magic. She couldn’t change her form at all. Her family had cast her out because of it. Separating her from her magical hoard had stripped her of her immortality. The poor little dragon had been left for dead.

I’m going to fill my hoard with the very best treasures! And all the prettiest men! And all the tastiest toads and snails!

“Now, Iso,” Frances scolded, “I can’t have you holding anyone against their will in here, no matter how pretty they are.”

Iso landed on a stone fountain of a fat cherub pouring water out of a clay jar. *Don't fret. I'm not going to hurt anyone. I just like to look at them.*

"Men don't like being held against their will," she explained patiently. "In fact, I don't think anyone likes that."

Iso's tail flicked through the flow of water playfully. *After the original shock wears off, I'm sure they'll be glad to call this lovely place home. Just look at it.*

Frances folded her arms. "Iso, I mean it. You can't—"

"Beg your pardon, my lady." The voice came to her from the hall. She found one of the Archer boys—she needed to stop calling them that out loud. They were adults now by human standards. Braydon summoned her, looking unsure of himself in his new footman's uniform.

We'll discuss this more later, Frances said firmly to her familiar before turning to face Braydon—who was often called Carrot by his family because of the strawberry highlights in his hair. Like his twin brother, he was freckled and fair-skinned. Both were strapping young men, tall and thick through the shoulders. "Is there a problem?"

"An unexpected visitor, my lady." Braydon—Carrot—shifted his weight uneasily. "I tried to see him off, but he claims his horse threw a shoe."

"Show him to the stables. The groom can—"

"Lord Glen Freest, my lady. He insists on speaking with you," Carrot said hurriedly, his cheeks turning ruddy. "But if you want us to have him off, my brother and I will—"

"No," she said sharply, picturing a scuffle that would have her human servants injured.

Though adults now, Carrot and Branson were still young enough to be a bit hot-headed, and they were overprotective of their home and family—quite overprotective of her too. Glen was only half-fae, but he had military training to boot, and a lord’s son wouldn’t take kindly to being ordered about by youthful mortals. She hated to think of what lesson the lord might try to teach them.

“No,” Frances repeated because Carrot’s large hands had formed into stubborn fists. “Show him to the drawing room. I will speak with him briefly, he’ll say what he’s come to say, and we’ll have him gone soon enough.”

* * *

Frances changed her dress three times and re-pinned her hair with the help of her lady’s maid before she came to join Lord Freest. She didn’t mind making him wait, even if it wasn’t the polite thing to do. She just couldn’t decide how to receive a man who had once triggered the blooming mate bond, had promised her the whole world repeatedly, and then had walked away without a warning.

He’d simply stopped writing, a ghost in the wind. At the time, Frances had genuinely worried something had happened to him. It might have been less painful in the end if something had stopped him from writing, other than his own disinterest.

Frances would hear whatever it was Glen felt he needed to say, and then she’d ask him to leave as politely as possible. There was no reason to be rude to him or to invite trouble—

And then she entered the drawing room and saw him there and all decorum left her body.

He stood near the fireplace, his long, lean frame clad in tall boots and a riding jacket. A man who cared deeply for appearances, his sleeves were ruffled and his waistcoat was brightly colored. The dark winter blue of his hair contrasted starkly with the almost luminescent snowy white of his complexion.

He shuffled his hat and leather gloves awkwardly in his hands—her servants hadn't collected them from him. Their way of telling him to scurry off in a hurry. The slight made her grin, but then Glen turned to face her as she entered, and he smiled in his easy, charming way.

He was still handsome. How annoying that he hadn't gotten less so after he'd abandoned her.

The anxiety of months of silence from him, waiting helplessly on another word only to hear *nothing* . . . The stress of it returned to her, and her heart hammered against the cage of her ribs.

"Ah, I see you finally got my letters," she said, her words dripping with disdain. Frances held up her hand, displaying the sizable emerald ring on her finger. "As you can see, your services are no longer necessary. I thank you for your visit. You may help yourself to the barn now—that's the large slate building just outside. Even you can't miss it."

Briefly his face fell. His lashes were as blue as his hair. It brought out the indigo in his eyes. Then his lips twitched. "I deserved that."

"And more," Frances fired back, annoyed by the amusement in his gaze. Then she took a steadying breath, grasping hold of a lady's decorum. She used to be so much better at hanging on to her manners. Her hands had

balled around the sides of her skirts, wrinkling them. With effort she unclenched her fingers. “Did your horse really throw a shoe?”

His grin put a dimple in his right cheek. “No,” he confessed. “I apologize for misleading your staff, but based on the surly way in which I was received, I was certain they wouldn’t allow me in otherwise.”

Frances rubbed a circle between her brows, trying to lessen the tension building there. “We’re all just a bit surprised, Glen. Why are you here?”

He took a cautious step closer. A settee and a larger sofa separated them now. “I needed to see you. I owe you a great many apologies, and I hoped you’d hear them straight from me. We deserve that, you and I, I think. Don’t you? The bond—our bond—was something else, wasn’t it? Things never should have ended the way they did, and I’m to blame for that.”

Glen deserved more than a slight, but he was a lord and a gentleman. And he was a guest, she his reluctant hostess. If she’d had it in her to always listen to her mother’s wisdom on these matters, she’d never have been ruined. She never would have had her heart broken in so many pieces. At the realization, the wound of her torn soul sharpened like a broadsword.

And frankly, if he wanted to grovel a bit, well, she deserved that, she decided.

Frances chewed on her cheek, considering him, her head at a tilt. “Shall I ring for tea?”

His next smile filled his alabaster cheeks. “Please do.”

* * *

Frances sat on the sofa, Iso spread out across her lap protectively. She listened to Glen's polite apologies at a distance, feeling somewhat like she was observing the whole of the event from a place outside her body. Seeing him, feeling Iso's dry heat, the three of them together again, brought up so many old memories. Old sights and tastes and smells returned to her. For a moment she thought she could scent the earthy aroma of the salve she'd repeatedly applied to the wound in Glen's shoulder, a ball of iron shot from a dueling pistol. She could hear the gentle tenor of his voice, telling her about his childhood holidays spent at a family home near the Moon Coast.

He had been so sweet to her, had seemed so gentle and helpless in his sick bed. She'd loved him, the bastard.

"You never should have been dismissed from the medical dispensary," Glen said for the fourth time. He sipped his tea, a slice of lemon hanging from the ceramic rim. "I will see your position returned to you. I may have said some things to my uncle in the heat of the moment that I didn't mean. When news that the engagement was true between you and . . . and *him* reached me, I admit I took it poorly."

"Thank you, but that's not necessary. I'm needed here." Frances stirred sugar into her teacup, offering a lump to Iso in the flat of her palm. Iso gobbled up the cube. "Honestly, I'm tired of poor Dr. Bandile constantly having to come to my defense every time a mortal claims they're scared there's a witch in the dispensary. I don't want to be where I'm not wanted anymore."

"And that's my fault too. I've done nothing but make your life harder, but I intend to fix all of that."

Frances brushed her fingers affectionately down Iso's scaled back. "I don't regret making Iso my familiar. I don't much care if it's not popular because of a bunch of silly old stories."

Thank you, Iso purred.

Iso had not been small enough to fit in her lap then. When they'd met, Iso was dying, stripped of her immortality. Frances had found the dragon eating out of the trash bins behind the dispensary, longing for her magical hoard. Iso had required bargain magic and a piece of soul to stay immortal. Becoming a familiar would save her, she'd said. Frances sympathized but wasn't yet ready to be transformed into a witch outcast.

They'd become easy friends. Frances brought her food each night. Iso kept her company when the dispensary was slow.

Glen lowered his cup to his knee and glanced at the dragon. "I can't say I'm sorry enough. My family strongly protested the idea of us as a match while your father was struggling financially, but I always hoped that things would right themselves. He would come out of it and then . . . who knows?"

Frances stopped stirring her tea. The little spoon clattered against the side of the cup. "You assumed I would simply wait? Without a word from you about any of this?"

I would very much like to melt his boots onto his feet now, Iso offered.

Frances ignored her, afraid her thoughts would misbehave and she'd accidentally answer in the affirmative.

"Well, no." Glen's pale cheeks filled with color. "I'm not as arrogant as all that, but I admit that I had been clinging to the thought of a future for us. That got me through the worst of the bond ache at being apart. I just

hate that you were forced to lower yourself so, and I wanted for so long for things to have turned out differently between us.”

“To lower myself?” He was speaking of Jonas, of course, and her gut filled with fire. She was allowed to insult her betrothed—in fact, she enjoyed doing so often—but to hell with anyone else who tried.

If she lost her temper now, she was sure Glen would dismiss her words. That was the way of gentlemen, so Frances grabbed hold of her years of experience as a proper lady and spoke with quiet resolve. “Jonas and I are mates. I’m not lowering myself at all. He is a most compatible match for me, and he treats me with honor.”

“You are deserving of so much more,” Glen insisted. “You are beautiful and kind, and you’ve been thrown at the wicked Bargainer like some shameless sacrifice. I no longer care to listen to the poison my family continues to spew on the matter. I know what we had wasn’t some desperate trick on your part. You saved my life.”

I saved his life, Iso grumbled. Frances patted the top of her head consolingly.

Glen had been dying in a medical bed in the back of the facility the night Frances met him. His body was too weak to fight through the iron poisoning, and magic had no effect on the metal. He couldn’t be healed by a mage. Iso had only a little blood magic, but with a fae bargain and a piece of Frances’s soul, Iso was certain she could keep his heart beating through the worst of it.

She’d been right.

“I wanted us to be together someday,” he said softly.

“*Someday?*” Frances repeated, nostrils flaring. “Oh, I see. Because you ruined me, you felt assured that no one else would ever want me. You

didn't need to write to me, because I'd always be there desperate for you, should things turn around. Isn't that right?"

"You're twisting my words." Glen leaned forward, a plea in his wide eyes. "What we had was—"

"The inferno that burns between Jonas and I makes what we had look like a weak candle, struggling to stay lit in a breeze," Frances said sternly.

Iso cackled. *Nicely done. He looks like you stuck one of your knitting needles in his heart.*

Glen flinched. "You wound me, my lady," he grumbled. His tone had her footmen, the twins, stepping from the hall into the threshold to glower.

Frances waved the boys away. "I didn't say that to hurt you . . . Well, maybe I did hope it would sting a little." Glen chuckled at that. "But it is the truth of things. Jonas and I are mates. What you and I had was sweet, but it's done now. I can imagine what learning I was engaged did to you, and I sympathize to a very small degree."

Glen set the cup and saucer aside with heat. The cup rattled on its plate. "You have no idea how the bond tore at me when it realized you were lost to me and promised to another."

"Yes, I do," Frances snarled. "I felt that same tear in my heart months ago because of you, you fool."

"Frances—"

She filled her lungs and pursed her lips, grasping for the last of her patience. "You can now have peace knowing that you apologized for the wrongs of the past. I'd rather you'd done so with a letter sent several months ago, but here we are. There need not be any animosity between us any longer, and you can take heart that there are other mates out there.

Ones who will burn for you, Glen, and ones who hopefully won't cause such conflict between you and your family."

"In my head, I know your words are wise." He laid a palm over his chest demonstratively. "But my heart, it still falters in your presence. The bond we shared hasn't dimmed for me, Frances. Seeing you, hearing your voice again, I still burn for you."

Blighter, Iso growled. He's acting like you were true-mated, but in the piece of soul you gifted me, I can hardly feel the mate potential between the two of you anymore.

"There's no need to move backward now," Frances said calmly, resisting the urge to find something to throw at him. Oh, how she'd longed for those words months ago. He was perfect for her, half-fae and half-human, as a part of two very different worlds as she was. He understood exactly what it was like to try to fit in with both.

It had required all of her courage to be honest with him about the toll becoming a witch had taken. Mate bonding was sacred to the fae, she knew that, but her conscious wouldn't let her remain silent on the matter. She'd penned him a letter, telling him that she was no longer whole. That she was trying, but she couldn't do it, would never be able to do it. Would never be his true mate.

She'd waited anxiously for the post every sunset after that confession, dreaming of his words, his continued reassurance that what they had was real and true, that he'd fix everything soon. That the gossips and the scandal sheets didn't matter. That his family's worries were unwarranted. That he didn't care about the mate bond or that illustrious peace promised to those who could secure their true mate. Every night, Glen had

disappointed her. When his post stopped, she'd sent letter after letter, all for nothing.

Glen hadn't been strong enough to be there for her, hadn't even been strong enough to let her down gently. She could almost forgive him for not wanting to give up the chance to have a true mate with someone else. That was a huge sacrifice indeed.

One she'd unknowingly paid to save his life. She hadn't grasped all the consequences then, but she'd paid them.

"What's done is done," Frances said with an air that contained none of the turmoil she'd felt back then. Because none of it mattered anymore. She was not that same lovesick woman with a broken soul.

"You're still my mate," Glen said earnestly. "You wanted me once. If I'm patient, you'll want me again."

"Have you forgotten that I'm a witch?" she asked through her teeth.

"I haven't forgotten." He shrugged his shoulders, and why shouldn't he be careless about all this? The pain she felt when the bond tugged at her injured soul was nothing to him. Frances gritted her teeth at the audacity of this man. "The witch queen has a true mate," he added.

Her jaw set, her belly filling with fire at his sheer arrogance. "The witch queen is fully immortal. She's a powerful, ancient warrior, for fuck's sake. I'm just . . . barely fae."

He cringed at her use of a curse word. "I think you underestimate yourself." Then he inspected the backs of his nails, like the conversation no longer interested him, like every other human gentleman when faced with a woman's emotions.

Well damn. Frances ground her teeth together. Her tongue wanted to get away from her to give him an extra helping of feminine feelings, but

then she caught the brothers peeking into the drawing room once more, and they were no longer alone. They'd fetched their father, Mr. Archer, the butler, a lean older human who had no business getting into a scrape with an immortal. Their shoulders were taut, thick brows furrowed. The air teemed with conflict. *Iso, I don't want any of them getting involved. Humans are too easy to hurt, and Glen knows what he's doing in a fight.*

Glen has the manners of a prig human and the stubbornness of a fae lord, the worst of both, Iso grunted. She sent a sooty snort his way. Glen frowned at her but made no comment. *I could try to help, but I'm still a runt.*

I wish you'd stop calling yourself that. You were as big as a horse the first time we met. She pictured young Iso eating out of the trash bins. Iso was as alone in the world as Frances had been. But they were alone no longer. *Between the two of us, perhaps we could manage to shove him out of the doors before anyone else got involved?*

You haven't met many dragons if you think a horse is big. Horses are snack-sized. Iso unfurled her wings in a threat display that Glen seemed completely unaware of. She spat a small spark of fire at him, but he didn't even flinch. *You see the problem? I could try to slow down his heart, but I'd need your blood to do it, and that would weaken you too. You fainted the last time I used your lifeforce to perform blood magic.*

"Glen," Frances hissed quietly through her teeth, "I think it's time for you to leave. You're upsetting my staff."

He leaned back, casually throwing his arm over the settee, taking note of the men gathering in the hall. Glen saluted them tauntingly with his teacup. "I think we're not done talking yet."

In that moment, Frances felt like she'd just stepped through a cobweb made of ice. She didn't recognize this man whom she'd once befriended, had once felt love for. He was cold and determined now, a fae man on the hunt.

A fae man she hoped would stand too close to a window so she could shove him out of it.

Chapter 9



Jonas

It had taken Jonas and his subordinates three whole weeks to get the railyard owner, Lord Thorvald, to return to the selling table. The lord had toyed with him, suggesting they meet at a club that he knew Jonas wasn't a member of: The Diamond Scar. The establishment he planned to one day soon join.

Further slights were exchanged, then finally an agreement to meet was made. Jonas hosted it at his offices just after the midnight meal. He'd insisted on that time because he wanted the mortals weary and eager to end things—and as revenge for the slight about the club. However, Thorvald came prepared with three of his sharpest business partners. They'd been arguing over the logistics of the sale for more than two hours.

Now it was Jonas who was weary. He'd come only with his secretary and his silly cat.

Thorvald's pale face had colored from peach to plum as the meeting went on. He was stubborn, almost as stubborn as the kitten who should have been out for a nap, but instead she bounced around on the carpet beneath Jonas's chair, plucking at the cuffs of his trousers, fighting falling asleep. She looked like a pouncing snowball with claws.

“There isn’t a noble bone in your body, Mr. Moen,” Thorvald accused. He was a large human with a bushy gray mustache. His business partners muttered their agreement.

Jonas sat at the head of the long table, nursing a small glass of water, ignoring Cat’s next attempt to get his attention. Fergus sat beside him looking nervous—the younger immortal always looked nervous. Blistering gaslights hung from the walls, burning too brightly. The humans insisted they were turned up so they could see. Jonas kept his back to the brightest one, and still his nocturnal eyes burned.

“What was that about a noble bone?” Jonas said innocently. “No. I haven’t got any of those. What I do have is most of the metal workers in the Lunar Province on my payroll.”

“And you’ve got them doing nothing!” Thorvald snarled.

“Not a thing,” Jonas agreed, a broad smile on his face. “Turns out your workers would much rather get paid to do nothing at all than something for you.”

“You’re burning money just to aggravate me!” Thorvald growled. On either side of him, his business partners began to whisper to each other.

Jonas waved his words away. “If you don’t have workers, you can’t complete your rail lines. If you can’t complete your rail lines, you lose your backers. Lose your backers, you lose your wealth. Make a deal with me now, and you remain a rich man.” Jonas studied the tops of his nails, bored by the conversation. “Frankly, I don’t see why this decision is so hard for you.”

Thorvald slammed his hand down on the oak table, causing it to vibrate. His business partners jumped. Cat yowled in protest at the sudden

sound. “I built this railyard with my own two hands! And you sit there mocking me and—”

“You didn’t build anything,” Jonas said casually, picking at the corner of his nail. “The workers did.”

Fergus hid his laugh poorly as a cough. Cat batted at Jonas’s laces and missed. She fell on her face against his boot. Recovering, she hissed up at him as though it were his fault she was too tired to keep her balance.

Thorvald’s mustache bristled. Jonas decided the owner was a man with more money than sense. The railyards had been a smart business move on Thorvald’s part, as populations doubled in the Lunar Province. But he’d moved too slowly when it came to building, and now Jonas scented profits like a shark smelling chum.

But Thorvald was talking in circles again. He was too emotionally attached to the project he was failing at, unwilling to let go of the image he had of himself as a railroad tycoon. Jonas didn’t care about image. He cared about being so wealthy he could never be denied anything ever again.

Jonas didn’t spend a lot of time dwelling on his fledgling self: struggling for scraps on the street, too hungry and lethargic to pick another pocket. Disquiet settled over him, and he sunk lower in his chair. This was why he hated being bored. If he allowed himself to be bored, thoughts he didn’t like slipped in.

But desperate and alone wouldn’t be him ever again, so there was no point in wasting energy dwelling on such things.

A knock at the window cut off Thorvald’s soliloquy on honor and a man’s purpose in life. Jonas squinted through the bright gaslights and

found Iso scratching at the glass. He scooted Cat off his boot as he stood and crossed to the window.

“Are you listening to me, Mr. Moen?” Thorvald barked.

But Jonas wasn’t listening. Iso’s scratching had turned incessant. He cracked the window, and the stench of brimstone hit him. The dragon’s breathing was ragged and sooty, like she’d pushed herself hard flying there.

Jonas retrieved the note from between her claws and opened it, ignoring the grumbles from the meeting table.

Jonas,

Please come to Whiteholm immediately.

Frances

Her handwriting was different, more hurried, the letters running together. He felt it then, distress in the bond. His heart pinched in his chest. He’d felt something earlier, something faint that made him dwell on his younger self, but he hadn’t attributed it to the bond. He thought his anxiety was about this sale, all his hard work finally finding fruition.

“I’m going to her now,” Jonas told Iso.

The little dragon huffed out a breath that sparked like a firework. Smoke shot out of her nostrils. She spun on the sill, spread her leathery wings and took flight.

“You’re going where?” Thorvald’s face had gone from plum to puce. “Now?”

“If you have any more questions about the terms of the sale, Fergus can answer them for you,” Jonas said.

“I . . . I’ll do my best,” Fergus spluttered.

Jonas stooped and scooped Cat off the floor, then he dropped her into the pocket of his jacket. Cat protested, snarling and spitting as Jonas hurried for the door. Soothed by the bouncing motion, she was snoring by the time he reached the exit.

“Mr. Moen!” Thorvald shouted, and Jonas paused, his hand on the knob. “If this is some sort of tactic, some trick, it won’t work. You walk out now, and this sale is dead.”

Profits mattered most, Jonas had thought. Profits were his purpose. And yet, in that moment, with France’s climbing stress thumping through their blooming bond, absolutely nothing mattered.

Nothing but Frances.

“Then consider the sale dead.” Jonas rushed out the door and didn’t look back.

* * *

Jonas hired the first driver he saw, a light two-wheel gig, and he paid him double to run their horse ragged. They made it most of the way to Whiteholm in record time, well before twilight. Cat snoozed in his pocket. As they passed through the northern wetlands, the manor came into focus: three stories of ornate façade and elaborate mason work. A stone lion roared above two heavy mahogany doors. The roofs were steep and gabled, dotted in multiple chimneys that stuck up like brick thumbs.

Jonas, son of a grocer—when his father bothered going to work—was about to be the lord of this large country estate. It was humbling and baffling all at the same time.

He didn't wait for the gig to come to a complete stop before he leapt to the gravel drive and sprinted for the door. As he came upon the front entrance, the manor remained eerily quiet. He'd visited before while hiring a master builder to head up installing the plumbing. There had been a zoological society full of humans then. Now, the sound of construction was gone, and no one was there to open the doors for him.

Fortunately, they were unlocked as well as unmanned. He let himself in, stress sharpening his keen senses. The corridors were empty.

"Hello?" he called.

"Hello," a small voice replied.

Jonas spotted a human girl in the entryway. She'd been playing with the incense at the metal altar of the Divine Night. She had the freckled skin common to the Archer family, but her hair was long and coal black, her eyes icy blue.

He smiled down at her compulsively. Jonas wasn't any good at aging mortals, but she was a fledgling for sure. Her head came no higher than his hip.

"Where's the lady of the house?"

"The dining room," the child said, then she put a finger to her lips as though she were about to share a secret. "Lady Aaberg says everything is all right, but Cousin Mary is keeping an eye on her."

"Is the lady not well?"

The child padded closer. Her feet were bare under her floral dress. "She looks well, but Cousin Mary doesn't like the man having supper with

her.”

Jonas’s pulse jumped and his nostrils flared. “I have an important job for you then.” He fished Cat out of his pocket and handed the kitten to the child. The girl took her in her arms excitedly, cradling the snowy bundle to her chest. “When Cat wakes up, she’ll be grumpy because she’s hungry. Give her what she wants. Mind her claws. I’m going to go help Lady Aaberg.”

The child cooed down at Cat. Jonas hurried by, then his boots caught on the tiles. He suddenly remembered he didn’t know where the blasted dining hall even was. The manor might as well have been a maze to him.

“That way!” the child said, pointing down the hall and to the right.

Jonas speed-walked in that direction, out of the foyer, and into a corridor lined with oil-paintings of Frances’s human ancestors. He spotted another mortal there: a young person—they always seemed young to him—but full-sized. She leaned her ear against two closed doors.

“You’ve been spying. Good,” Jonas drawled, and the woman leapt upright, a hand over her heart. “You’ll be able to tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Mr. Moen . . . You scared me, sir.” The woman breathed heavily. She was dressed like a maid in a knit apron. A lace bonnet covered most of her light hair. “I don’t usually skulk about, sir. I was just worried about my lady.”

“Who are you?”

“Mary Archer, sir. I’m the . . . well, actually I don’t have a title yet. I do a lot of things about the house. The lady hasn’t decided what to call me.”

Jonas could hear quiet voices coming from behind the doors. “Is Lady Aaberg in there?”

“She is. She sent everybody away, sir. I believe she’s trying to avoid trouble, but we know something’s wrong. My cousins are gathered at the other door, in case she needs us, sir. Lord Freest is in there with her.”

Heat shot down his spine, then churned through his belly. “Lord *Glen* Freest,” Jonas growled. It wasn’t a question.

“I heard him threaten to kidnap her, sir,” Mary hissed. “Some nonsense about it being his right as a mate, but then Lady Aaberg calmed him down. She agreed to keep talking with him if he’d behave sensibly. They’re having a meal together now, but I don’t think he plans to leave on his own.”

A quiet calm fell over Jonas, the sort he’d learned to harness when in dangerous situations while living on the streets. Panic, he’d found as a young fae, would get him hurt or robbed. Peace kept his head clear and helped him find a quick solution. Sometimes the solution was his words: a trick or a trade. Sometimes the problem had to be solved with his fists.

Jonas’s fingers flexed. He hoped today he’d get to use his fists.

Bending low, he removed the dagger he hid in his boot. It gleamed silver and was small enough to conceal in his palm. “Please hold this for me. It’ll keep me from killing the bastard before I mean to.”

She took the blade, holding it awkwardly between two fingers. “Oh but, sir . . . what if he deserves your dagger?”

Jonas grinned at her. “That’s savage, Mary,” he purred approvingly. “I’m definitely going to remember you. Stay out of sight for me and make sure your cousins do the same.”

She bobbed her head in a quick bow that he wasn't worthy of because he was still just the son of a grocer.

Jonas pushed open the doors. His eyes found Frances first. Lines of tension bracketed her mouth and smudges shadowed her eyes. She appeared worn but whole.

"Frances," he said, "are you quite well?"

Glen Freest sat at the head of the table like he was the Lord of Whiteholm, the rat. He had the sense to balk for a moment, before he focused on his plate, cutting roast lamb into smaller and smaller pieces with a knife and fork.

"I'm well now." Frances's shoulders dropped like she'd been holding in a breath. "I'm very glad to see you."

"Lord Freest," Jonas drawled. "What a surprise. You're about 13 months too late, or didn't you realize?"

"I wondered when you'd show up. As soon as the little dragon disappeared, I figured trouble would be coming soon." Glen's knife scraped loudly at the bottom of the ceramic plate. He forked a small serving into his mouth and chewed quickly.

Jonas rounded the table and put a hand on Frances's shoulder. She was shaking. "May I have this chair, my dear? Lord Freest and I have a lot to talk about."

"We do," Glen said, dropping his fork beside his plate. He kept his knife in a tight fist.

Frances scooted down a chair, her hazel eyes wide. As Jonas claimed her seat, he dropped a hand comfortingly on her knee.

"Perhaps you should start with why the fuck you're here terrorizing my bride," Jonas said casually. He felt Frances stiffen. Then her hand slid over

his. She squeezed his fingers.

A muscle jumped in Glen's cheek. Instead of answering, he took his time lifting his glass of wine and tasting it. "Frances is my mate. There was a misunderstanding between us, but your services as a substitute are no longer required. She is testing me now, as she has every right to. I confess I failed her before, but I will have her reputation set to rights. All will be well between us soon."

Jonas smiled, his showing of teeth full of menace. "And what if I don't agree that my services—as you call them—are no longer required?"

Glen's returning grin was smug. "You're the Bargainer. I'm a wealthy lord. As I've already told Frances, I'm sure we can come to some arrangement, you and I. That's the way with you, isn't it?"

"You mean your father is wealthy. You're a second son. Heir to nothing," Jonas said slowly, lacing his fingers with Frances's. "You performed a small stint in the military and now you're already back, hero of no one, living off your father's teat. You didn't even make the rank of officer. Strange for a lord's son. I thought they usually just gave those away to noble prigs like you. Did the cowardice you displayed with regard to my mate when society scorned her reveal itself during your service? Or was it the lack of integrity I see now, coming here to claim a woman you scorned, simply because she's taken another?"

Glen's smile fell into a grimace. "I'm not interested in exchanging insults like school boys. That's not why we're here. Name your price."

"A trade for her hand? That's an expensive proposal, indeed. I'm not certain you have the range." Jonas's every word was flavored with disdain.

"I know she's a prize. What's it to be, then?" Glen raised a blue brow at him. He had such a fair complexion, Jonas imagined his face would

bruise very colorfully when struck. He longed to see that soon.

Frances's plate remained untouched before him. Jonas picked off a sliver of lamb and consumed it, thinking through his words. "In exchange for releasing Frances from our agreement, I'd consider making a deal for your soul."

Glen choked. "You're joking."

"I don't make jokes when it comes to deals," he said, his expression severe. "Give me your soul here and now, and I'll think on letting her go from our agreement."

Glen balled up his cloth napkin and tossed it onto his plate. "That's a ridiculous offer and you know it. A true mate isn't possible without a soul. What would be the point? You wouldn't give away your soul."

"You think Frances is worth less?" Under the table, Jonas's thumb brushed over her knuckles.

"Make me a true offer," Glen grouched. "I'm done with your games."

"Oh, I see," Jonas said drolly. "Well, since you're serious and all, I'll take half your soul, your house, all your belongings, and all of your family's ancestral estates. Leave them to me, and then I'll consider releasing Frances from our engagement."

Glen scoffed. "If you won't make a real offer, then there's only one way to settle this. Pistols at dawn."

"Glen, no," Frances gasped. "Dueling is how you got yourself iron poisoning in the first place! Play with your guns somewhere else, but you're not shooting at my betrothed!"

Glen acted as though he hadn't heard her speak at all.

"Pistols?" Jonas chuckled. "You're half-fae, yes? Why in the hottest hell would I give up my physical advantage for a chance to shoot at you

with some illegal mortal weapon I've never touched before?"

"It's the way of gentlemen," Glen spat. "Not that common riffraff like you would know."

"Ah. I see," Jonas droned. "I already suspected it, but now I'm certain. Gentlemen are idiots." He glanced at his intended. "Frances, it was good of you to summon me here, but when you did, were you hoping I'd behave like a mortal gentleman? Or a fae barbarian? Before I respond, I need to know."

Frances released his hand with a long sigh. "Barbarian," she confessed.

"Excellent," Jonas replied, then he lunged across the table, striking out like a viper.

Glen's reflexes were quick, but he'd been caught off-guard. He tried to stab at Jonas with the table knife, but Jonas was too close, and the hit was easily blocked with his elbow. Jonas got him by the throat, a hand winding into the collar of his shirt, pulling it tight enough to strangle. He dragged the lord across his plate, scattering food, spilling wine.

Frances leapt out of her chair and scurried toward the far wall.

"*Pistols?*" Jonas repeated, snorting.

He threw Glen down onto the hardwood. The lord landed on his back, air blasted from him. While he struggled to recover his breath, Jonas made a fist and planted it in his nose. The wet crunch was most satisfying. Glen's head recoiled off the floor. Jonas hit him once more, this time in the eye.

Frances gasped and covered her mouth. He'd wanted to hit him again, but the shock on her face stayed his hand.

Jonas grabbed Glen by the collar and the front of his shirt. He jerked him to his feet. The lord wobbled there, his eye red and swelling. Jonas

had been right: already, color marred the snowy skin. Blood trickled from his nose.

“It’s time for you to leave,” Jonas said, the ache in his knuckles dull and pulsing. “You’ve overstayed, and from the look of things, you never were welcome. Frances, if you would kindly get the doors.”

Frances moved to obey, but it was Mary who pushed them open from the other side, brandishing the little dagger he’d entrusted to her.

“Good show, sir,” Mary muttered as Jonas dragged a wobbling Glen out into the hall.

Frances hoisted her skirts over her ankles and jogged ahead of them.

Jonas took the corner too sharply, knocking Glen against the wall entirely on purpose, then into the next one. A large glint frame fell crooked. Glen grunted and faltered, nearly spilling forward, but Jonas jerked him upright and kept him moving.

Frances opened the front doors wide. Jonas escorted the lord all the way out of the manor, half-dragging him down the gravel drive to the waiting gig. Heart a whirlwind in his chest, he chucked Glen into the open passenger seat.

The driver appeared unconcerned. “Where to?” he asked casually.

Jonas guessed the driver must frequent Dimmet Street, if a moaning, bloodied man tossed into his cab didn’t faze him. He dug a half-piece and a copper crescent out of his pocket and handed it to the driver. “Drop him anywhere in the city you like, just get him the fuck out of here.”

The driver accepted the coins, tipped his hat in farewell, and urged his horse on.

Jonas waited until the hackney was out of sight before he stormed back toward the manor. Frances waited for him by the entrance, wringing her

hands. He caught her arm and yanked her inside behind him.

“You.” Jonas dragged her against his body, then pinned her to the closed door, rattling the frame. His hand hung loosely around her throat; the other gripped her hip. His heart was a drumbeat he was sure she could hear. “Did he touch you?”

“No,” she gasped. Bond lust reverberated through them. Her pupils dilated. Her chest heaved.

“Good.” Lifting her chin, he forced her to meet his eyes. “Can I kiss you?”

“Yes!” she said earnestly.

Blood roaring in his ears, he pressed his lips to hers. The speed at which their kiss transformed from hot and flustered to something languid and tender had his head spinning. Her tongue teased, daring him to respond. He did, claiming her mouth while his fingers played in her hair, releasing one of the pins.

Dark tresses spilled over her shoulder. He ran his hand through them. “Gods, your beautiful hair is so damn long. Such a shame it’s always pinned up.” He pulled the coils taut. They fell past her breasts, below her belly button.

She hummed against his skin, dropping feathery kisses along his jaw that made his cock turn to granite.

Noises in the hall drew them apart. Jonas rubbed at his swelling mouth with the back of his hand and adjusted his trousers. With effort, he refrained from scowling at the intruder. If he’d had a clearer head, he’d have pulled his mate into an empty room. They’d still be alone then, and he’d have his face buried in her perfect breasts, where it belonged.

Frances fought her loose hair back into its pins. “Carrot, what happened?”

Jonas was surprised to see a footman—not a vegetable—lumbering toward them, his cheek and jaw raked in claw marks. He carried Cat out in front of him, holding her by the scruff of her neck. She yowled and hissed and kicked at the air.

“Where’s the little girl I entrusted her to?” Jonas asked. The footman reached him and handed over the rioting ball of white fluff. Jonas stuffed her in his jacket pocket. Cat let out a series of grumbled meows and calmed. “She’s not so vicious with girls. She has good taste, obviously.”

“Little Billie went to fetch her something to eat,” Carrot explained. “She left her in the parlor with me, but then the kitten started tearing at the furniture, and I told her to stop.”

“Ah, yes, Cat doesn’t like that,” Jonas said.

“Carrot,” Frances said, concern raising the pitch of her voice, “wait for me in the kitchens. I’ll tend to your injuries. We don’t want them getting infected.”

Carrot glared at the feline fluff poking out of Jonas’s pocket before ambling off.

“Perhaps it’s time you put your engagement present in the barn,” Frances suggested.

“If only that were possible.” Jonas found the top of Cat’s head with his finger, and he scratched between her ears. She purred at him. “She’s not a barn cat, you see. You gave me a city cat, so she’ll have to come back to the Row with me. It’s where she belongs.”

Frances rolled her eyes at him. “She’s a spoiled cat, is what she is.”

Jonas felt his grin go lopsided. “She was entrusted to my care. It is my duty to treat her to whatever she wishes.”

Frances’s laughter was melodious. Her color was still high from their embrace. The combination was striking. “That wasn’t at all part of the requirements. No one compelled you to feed her by hand three times a day and never tell her no.”

Cat growled in his pocket at her least favorite word.

“Shh,” Jonas soothed her. “Don’t listen to the mean woman. You’re fine exactly as you are.” He met Frances’s eyes, and her hazel gaze softened. “Are we alone again?”

“We are,” Frances said, but then her lashes lowered, and her cheeks flushed. The bond lust had cooled between them as their adrenaline waned.

He wanted to kiss her witless again but sensed his chance had gone. She was going to behave like a proper lady now, going to leave him to patch up the human boy.

When he leaned in closer, Frances didn’t retreat from him. She stilled as he spoke. “If you’d let me,” he whispered in her ear, “I’d spoil you rotten, too.”

Chapter 10



Frances,

After our wedding, I'll need to attend a dinner party for peers interested in becoming members at an establishment called The Diamond Scar. Many appealing business transactions are finalized here. I'll need to behave passably the way a lord should.

I've been reassured that it's a simple preliminary event usually hosted by the owner. But my secretary just informed me that I'm "not my best" at dinner parties. I thought you might have suggestions about that.

Try to be gentle with your thoughts. I have feelings, you know. Not a lot of them, but a few.

Jonas

Jonas,

I've seen you at dinner parties. Your secretary is being polite when he says you're "not your best." You're a savage at events. If it's a good impression you'd like to make, then some practice is in order. Do you have plans for the midnight meal tomorrow?

You're welcome at Whiteholm if you're free.

*Gently,
Frances*

*Frances,
I'll be there with club in hand, wearing my cleanest shirt with
the fewest bloodstains.
Always,
Your Barbarian*

* * *

Frances

As midnight neared the next evening, Frances allowed herself a moment to acknowledge that she was excited to see Jonas again, a feeling she'd been repressing since he'd returned to River Row after putting Glen out the door. When the bond attempted to thrum in her chest over it, she talked herself down. It was good that they could be *friends*, she'd say. There was no harm in looking forward to his company, but allowing herself to become consumed by the bond to the point of giving it the power to dictate her decisions the way she had in the past was folly that would lead only to panic and pain.

What rational person would expose their already broken soul to the wicked Bargainer and expect anything less than trouble in return?

Carrot, dressed in a more formal footman uniform, found her in the parlor and advised her that Mr. Moen had arrived. The servants were as

eager as she was, especially after the excitement of Jonas's last visit. She set aside her knitting and pulled her favorite shawl over her shoulders.

Frances met Jonas in the foyer. He looked dapper in a paisley waistcoat and stiffly starched linen shirt.

"No bloodstains at all," she said, her smile stretching her lips.

"None that you can see." His returning grin was full of warmth rather than the dry sarcasm of his words, a change she hadn't been anticipating, as she handed him a tall match. She allowed him the honor of lighting the incense at the altar of the Divine Night, granting him the Moon Mother's blessing—something the full-blooded humans in her home called catering good luck.

Frances took his arm when he offered it, ignoring the flutter of butterfly wings in her belly. "You're early," she said, guiding him down the hall toward the main corridor.

His brow furrowed. "It's nearly midnight."

"For parties and functions, you can't expect to keep time like a tradesman. When a human invites you to a party, they're expecting you to arrive a little late. Arriving on time is seen as odd, and early is perceived as rude."

"That makes no sense at all. Why can't they just say what they mean?"

"I don't know *why* things are this way. I just know that they are." Frances gestured at the row of gilded frames on the wall. "In every mortal house you enter, you'll see a display like this."

"Ah, this one I know." Jonas pointed at the nearest picture. "Humans value their dead relatives more than the living ones."

Frances chuckled. "We honor our ancestors. We pray to them and ask for their blessings and assistance the same way the fae sing to the Divines."

I do my best to honor both beliefs.” Her hand reached once more for the charm that was no longer around her neck, a centuries-old habit her fingers refused to forget.

Jonas caught the movement and his eyes narrowed briefly, but he didn’t comment. “And now the drinks and refreshments portion?” he guessed.

“Not just yet.” She pulled on his arm and brought him to a halt. “During a mortal event, you should never pass through a hall like this one without commenting on the paintings. Er, politely.”

Jonas looked around, perplexed. “But there are so many. Do I comment on all of them?”

“The size of the frame denotes the importance of the ancestor to the family. Try to comment on the large ones at least.”

Jonas tugged her forward two paces, stopping in front of her many-greats-grandfather dressed in military garb, captured from the bust up. “Why does this mortal look so constipated?”

Frances chuckled. “He’s probably grumpy about being forced to sit through a portrait while the artist paints him for hours.”

“Hours? Gods, now I pity the man for more than just being dead.”

Frances laughed, and the bond flittered in her chest. She pursed her lips, hoping to stifle the sensation triggered by her fondness for his humor. “These are not the sort of comments I had in mind. It might be best if you simply paused at the larger frames to consider them for a bit. That should satisfy the hosts nicely and prevent you from . . .” She waved her hand flippantly, uncertain how to finish the thought. Another time, she’d have insulted him gladly, but she found it difficult to do so when he was being so personable with her.

“Prevent me from being me?” His lips twitched.

“Being too bluntly fae,” she said civilly. Being civil with him sat wrong with her. They weren’t amicable with each other. There was an unspoken agreement of mutual animosity and tolerant partnership between them. Being able to be unapologetically herself in his presence made their partnership work. She bit her lip, uncertain how to salvage the situation.

Jonas stopped at the next gilt frame. He put on a show: stroking his chin and narrowing his eyes. “Hmm,” he hummed near her ear, deep and gravelly. Frances felt muscles low in her belly clench. “Oh,” he said, voice turning raspy. “You *liked* that.”

“The bond liked that,” she grumbled, feeling a flush rise from her neck straight to the tips of her ears.

“The bond liked that because *you* liked that.” His Bargainer’s grin was too smug.

“If you’re quite finished purring at me, we can head to the parlor now.” The spark of animosity between them was back, and she embraced the feeling. All was right in her world once more.

She steered him into the parlor. Mary was there, setting up the room, readying the refreshment cart. They sat together on a sofa near the fireplace. Mary brought them a serving tray of small cucumber sandwiches.

“I thought you were looking a bit peckish earlier, my lady,” Mary said, laying the tray out on the coffee table before them. “I took the liberty of having this made up for you and Mr. Moen.”

“Thank you, Mary.”

“Peckish?” Jonas looked Frances over. He took her hand and lifted it. “This shade of pink is common amongst the fae. It’s not a sign of hunger

or illness.”

Mary bit her lip bashfully.

“It’s not my skin tone.” Frances slid her hand out of his and lowered her voice. “Humans tend to think I’m too thin. My staff kindly worries about me.”

Mary wrung her hands in her knit apron. “I hope I haven’t offended, my lady?”

Frances smiled reassuringly. “Absolutely not. Thank you for these. You’re right. I am hungry.”

Jonas was still staring at her like she had a complicated math problem tattooed on her dress.

She leaned in closer and dropped her voice. “If you’re confused, it’s because the fae believe I’m too heavy. Fae are rather angular beings, after all.”

Jonas blinked at her. “There is no such thing as ‘too heavy.’ Who would want *less* of a beautiful woman? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Well said. For that, you get a sandwich.” Frances put one of the thinly sliced treats in his hand.

Jonas ate it in one bite and grabbed for another.

“No, no,” Frances said, lifting the tray out of his reach. “On second thought, Mary, I’ve decided these are too much of a temptation for me. Please take them back to the kitchens. I don’t want to spoil my appetite. Let the boys—er—the twins have their fill of them.”

“Of course, my lady.” Mary accepted the tray just as Frances snatched one last sandwich from it. With a polite curtsy, Mary carried it from the room.

“You little bully,” Jonas grumped. “You know I love those little sandwiches, and I’m hungry.”

“It’s polite not to have more than one or two during this part of the party.” Frances chortled at his heartbroken expression. Then she displayed her open hand, the object of his desire balanced in the center of her palm. “This recipe was invented by humans and prepared by mortal hands. I think if you’d like to have another”—he grabbed for it again but she dodged him—“you should say something nice about humans first.”

“I see what this is now,” Jonas tutted. “Extortion.”

She felt her lips twist. “Your specialty.”

His brown eyes warmed as they captured hers. The drumbeat of their bond picked up from a distant thrum to a heavy thud.

“Hmm. Humans . . .” he purred, his voice dropping into something darkly seductive. His hand found the top of her sleeve, and he ran a finger down her arm, slowing when taffeta turned to flesh. Her skin pebbled under his touch. “Humans are *soft*,” he said as he reached the pulse in her wrist. His thumb swept over the delicate skin there, back and forth.

Frances worked her throat. “Here.” She handed the sandwich to him. “You’ve earned it.”

The gaslights brought out the rim of gold in his brown eyes and the mahogany highlights in his dark hair. Jonas bent low and ate the sandwich right out of her hand, lips skimming the skin of her palm. Her lungs hitched.

Feeding one’s mate was a bonding ritual, not one she’d intended to practice just then, but reason had gotten away from her, and now her body was hot and aching. Her pulse danced in her wrists and between her thighs.

She wanted to touch and be touched.

Frances allowed her shawl to drop off her shoulders. Jonas's eyes flittered over her form. She felt his gaze as deeply as the tips of his fingers at her pulse, and her ears burned hot. The pull of the bond drew him closer, bringing his nose near her throat.

"Jonas?" she asked, breathlessly.

He scooted in, pressing his thigh to hers. "Did you dress for me tonight?"

"Whatever do you mean?" she said, knowing exactly what he meant. She'd tried on several gowns before settling on this one. The bodice was boned, the neckline dipped temptingly low, and the taffeta was a rich maroon that complemented her rosy pink skin. Her hair was pinned loosely, allowing multiple curls to frame her face, because he'd mentioned liking her hair long the last time he'd kissed her—

Oh, gods! *She definitely shouldn't be thinking about that kiss right now!*

But now it was the only thing on her mind. His lips hovered over her skin, his breath creating a balmy humidity as potent as any caress.

"Jonas . . . ? What are you doing?"

"Appreciating your efforts." His lips moved whisper-close to the pumping pulse in her throat.

Blood roared in her ears. His arms encircled her, dragging her nearer. His mouth made trails, the gentlest of kisses, from her throat to the dip of her clavicle, then lower still.

"Jonas," she whimpered.

He kissed her roughly then, right at the top of her breast, over her heart. "Let me spoil you a little."

There were so very many reasons why she shouldn't agree to that—shouldn't agree to anything the Bargainer offered her. Especially not if it wasn't in writing, in triplicate, signed by both parties with no options for him to exploit or extort or trick.

But suddenly she couldn't remember a single one of those reasons.

“Yes.” She wasn't entirely sure she'd said the word aloud. She'd meant to, but her lungs were full to bursting, the air trapped there.

Whatever the status of her voice, apparently he understood her anyway. He cupped her hip, then her waist, moving his way up to stroke the bottoms of her breasts before kneading tenderly back down again. Her breath left her in a whoosh. His kisses were slow and wet and hot. He used tongue and teeth, nipping at her skin, licking her pulse before returning to pleasingly torment the tops of her breasts.

Jonas pushed against her bodice, forcing her breasts higher and bringing her nipples aching close to the trim of her neckline. He ravished the slope of those soft pillows with his attention, the scrape of his stubble as erotic as his exhale straight down her dress.

Gently, he laid her over his lap, bracing her in one arm. He teased her ear from the lobe to the sensitive tip, his breath loud and humid and intoxicating. Her hips rolled, neediness pooling low in her belly.

As he claimed her mouth, his hand roved below her navel. A moment of trepidation seized her. Unfriendly reminders of who he was pelted her: Bargainer. Trickster. Wicked.

Protector. He'd been there when she needed him most.

Friend. She'd lost all of hers when she was ruined, but Jonas didn't care about all that—would never care about it. Would never hold any of it against her.

Mate, the bond screamed at her.

She spread her thighs for him, and he stroked the top of her sex over her skirts. Frances's fingers darted through his hair, circling the ridge of his horns.

He grunted his encouragement as her grip enclosed the base completely and tightened.

And gods, it was so good. *He* was so good. The noises bursting out of her were utterly shameless. Her hips found a rhythm with the gentle pressure of his hand, rubbing into her sensitive flesh until she was worried she'd dampen the layers of fabric with her pleasure.

He managed to pull down her neckline, the corset and chemise with it, freeing one of her taut nipples. He took it in his mouth and suckled gently, pleasuring her with firm strokes of his fingers.

Frances saw stars. A feeling of weightlessness coiled in her limbs as her hips rolled forward. The bond was there in her release, cinching her lungs, shooting panic and bliss through her body.

The air she fought to inhale grew thin. Spots popped before her eyes. Her vision went hazy around the edges, and then darkness engulfed her.

* * *

Frances woke in a fog with her mate hovering over her, smiling much, *much* too smugly.

"You swooned," he said, his grin going lopsided.

Frances covered her face with her hands and groaned. "Divine's blood."

“I had no idea you had such strong feelings for me, Frances,” he said drolly.

“I have plenty of feelings for you,” she growled, “and all of them are passionately antagonistic.”

“My dear lady, antagonistic or not, you just came so hard you lost consciousness, and I was just getting started.”

She tried to roll out of his lap, but he held her firmly in place across his thighs, her head back on the padded corner of the sofa.

“Ugh, don’t be insufferable about this.” Still unwilling to meet his eyes, Frances covered her gaze with her arm, her face burning. “It was the damn *bond* and my broken soul that made me swoon, and you know it!”

His chuckle rumbled through his chest and into her body, stirring up the thrum of their connection. “Denial is unbecoming.”

“I’m not in denial! I’m— What happened to my clothes?” She crossed her arms over her chest. Her bodice was undone and pulled down over her skirt. Her corset was partially opened, the laces loose.

“Remain calm,” he purred. “Though my thoughts were full of barbarism, I had the hands of a gentleman and the intentions of a much nobler man the entire time I undressed you.”

Frances snorted. “Intentions of an ass. How could you?”

“I thought you might wish to breathe, so I loosened your corset,” he said evenly, and Frances’s more violent thoughts cooled. She did in fact like breathing. “The boning in your bodice looks like a torture device, by the way. I’m not sure how a nurse like yourself could condone such a thing, let alone put it on. I applaud the lovely way it presented your breasts to me, but your abundant assets don’t need any assistance in drawing my eyes.”

Frances rubbed a small circle between her brows. “I would like to immediately stop having a conversation about my breasts, please.”

“Pity, but very well. After I saved your lungs, I ordered your nervous staff members to keep out since I knew you wouldn’t want them to see you in this state. I suggest you calm them soon. Comforting words aren’t a specialty of mine.”

“That was . . .” She peeked up at him, and he raised a sarcastic brow in return. “That was decent of you. I’m sorry I was short about it.”

“Yes, I surprise even myself sometimes.”

Frances stood before him and re-dressed with his assistance. “Hands of a gentleman,” she reminded him.

“How dull. But all right, hands of a gentleman,” he agreed dryly.

Finished, she pulled up her sleeves and held back her hair so he could refasten her dress. “Hmm. I can’t decide if I should be bothered that you’re so efficient with my clothing or grateful.”

“You should be pleased.” Jonas tugged the fabric tight and hooked the fastenings, his Bargainer’s smile in his voice. “Whatever experiences I’ve had, you’ll soon get to reap all the benefits.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” she grumbled. When dealing with tricksters, one needed always to be on their guard. She sought to be a competent business partner, possibly a friend, not a helpless mate swooning with need every time he offered to touch her. Their deal remained advantageous to both of them, but when they married, he’d return to his duties in the city. She didn’t want to be trapped in her pining like she had with the last mate, waiting for it all to go wrong again because she couldn’t do what a proper fae mate was supposed to do.

Out in the hall, it took Frances several minutes to calm Mary and the small collection of maids waiting there for her.

“I came to tell you lunch was ready, but Mr. Moen said you’d fainted!” Mary crooned, concern etched in her freckled face. “I knew I should have suggested again that you eat more sandwiches.”

Frances reassured her staff that she was quite well, blaming the mishap on the tight boning of her dress. When they were soothed, she escorted Jonas to the formal dining hall, which had several more oil paintings of deceased ancestors.

He stopped and commented satirically on all of them.

“If I purr at this one, are you going to swoon again?” he said archly, tossing a thumb over his shoulder at a picture of her great uncle on horseback.

“I’m not going to swoon,” Frances said through her teeth. “I’m beginning to deeply regret the fae bargain we made. I’d love to throw something at you right now, and it wouldn’t be any fun at all if it didn’t hurt.”

Her threat did not have the effect she was going for. It seemed to delight him. His face lit, and in response she was sucking in her cheeks, forcing down the smile his always inspired.

“This woman looks like she’s wearing a giant birthday cake.” He pointed to the painting of one of her aunts in a coral pink dress with billowy skirts, an elaborate bustle, and ruffled sleeves.

“Those dresses were all the fashion back then.” She sighed. “I still miss the big hats.”

He reached the gilt frame that held her mother above the fireplace mantel, and she prepared to tell him off. Lady Alice Aaberg would not be

fodder for his comedy. Frances resembled her mother closely—same height and figure, same dark, curly hair. But Jonas didn't speak right away. He shifted in closer, squinting up at the piece, and he hovered there.

"You can see the compassion in her gaze," Jonas said thoughtfully, his tone mollifying. "Your father is kind. Your mother was caring . . . Where in the hottest hell did all your snide fire come from?"

"You bring that out in me," she said, a warmth growing in her chest. Her mother was very compassionate, especially to the lovely humans who made her manor a home. The image of her mother still had the power to make her eyes well, even after all these years. She kept her head down, forcing her focus onto the task at hand.

Frances seated Jonas at the head of the table in the lord's chair, the large ornate one with the tallest back. He preened a little as he made himself comfortable. His boyish excitement was catching. Then the Archer brothers filed into the room, standing at the ready nearest the wall behind their soon-to-be lord.

She showed Jonas where to lay his cloth napkin over his thighs just under his belt. "And then your admirer sits on your left. Once I'm your wife, I can sit and stand at functions wherever I like, but in order to show the public my preference for you while I'm unwed, I sit on your left."

"Closer to my heart," he said with faux dramatics.

"Precisely." She scooted her chair in nearer to his so she could reach his place setting more easily. "If you need something, you ask the footman just behind you, not the server or the maids. Servers will have assigned tasks that it's best not to interrupt. There will be many footmen at a large party. The closest one will tend to you."

Jonas glanced behind him where the Archer twins stood politely at the ready with their hands linked behind their backs.

“You, Radish,” he said, pointing to the brother who still had the faint remnants of claw marks on his face. “Food, please. Your bully of a mistress only allowed me to have two tiny sandwiches, and I’m starving.”

Braydon frowned, wrinkling the scratches on his face. His brother laughed boisterously.

“We call him Carrot,” Frances explained. “When there are guests about, he’s Braydon. Mary will bring out the first course shortly. But do try not to wither away until then. Cook makes an excellent roast. If you expire, you’ll miss it.”

As though summoned, Mary hurried through the swinging side doors, balancing two stacked crystal bowls in one hand and a heavy pot of steaming soup in the other. A few strands of her yellow hair had broken free from her bonnet. She set the pot down on a service table and stuffed the bowls into Carrot’s arms.

“Is everything all right?” Frances recognized that frazzled look in her most trusted servant.

“No worries, my lady. I’m handling it.”

“Is it Billie again?” Frances guessed. “If she needs to sit with us for a bit, that won’t be a problem. Mr. Moen and I don’t mind.”

“Oh, but little ones don’t belong in here, my lady,” Mary hesitated, wringing her hands. “And I hate putting you out so. It isn’t right.”

“It’s no bother. I want to help,” Frances insisted.

“Bless you. I don’t think she should be alone with Cook for long right now, and you know how the girl wanders,” Mary said, before she vanished back through the swinging doors.

Carrot and his brother spooned soup into the crystal bowls and served them. Mary reappeared shortly, towing young Billie by the arm. The six-year-old looked a bit stunned. Her knit apron was rumpled, and her feet were bare because no one could keep shoes on the girl. They were probably lost again, tucked some silly place and forgotten. Her older cousin, Mary, pulled out the chair for her on the other side of Jonas.

“Behave yourself, Billie,” Mary warned, wagging a stern finger in her face. “I’ll be right back.”

Billie’s legs weren’t quite long enough to reach the floor. She laid her chin on the table before she seemed to recognize Jonas and perked immediately.

“Did you bring your kitten?” Billie climbed to her knees in her chair, stretching her neck to peek down at his jacket pockets.

“I didn’t,” he said. The girl’s face fell. Her frown brought out the same sour expression in Jonas. “I’m sure Turnip here appreciates Cat staying behind today—”

“Carrot, sir,” the footman said gloomily. His brother let out another belly laugh.

“—but I’ll bring her next time, just for you,” Jonas vowed. “What’s your story, little one?”

Frances answered for her, using the polite line she and Mary had discussed. “Billie is a guest here, staying with her cousins for a time while her father seeks to make a name for himself elsewhere.”

“My mother is dead,” Billie said frankly, as was her way. “And I don’t know what my father looks like or where he is.”

Frances’s mouth fell open in an effort to salvage the uncomfortable situation, but no explanation presented itself, so she closed it again.

Looking between them, she was apparently the only one uncomfortable, her genteel breeding getting the better of her.

“I’m sorry about your mother. And your father—I had a father like that,” Jonas shared, reading between the lines. “He was always hunting fortunes that never came to fruition for himself instead of going to work where the money was assured. I don’t know where he or my mother are now either.” His nose wrinkled. “Billie is a terrible mortal name. Did he give you that? Rude of him.”

“Jonas,” Frances scolded. Carrot and Branson sniggered.

“I hate my name,” Billie chimed in. “He named me after himself, but I want a name that’s for me, not him! Something pretty.”

“As you should,” Jonas said. “A pretty girl should have a pretty name.”

Billie’s little head canted. She tapped thoughtfully on the end of her pointed chin. “Yes, but what?”

Frances stared between them, at a loss, uncertain if she should intervene or not.

Jonas looked the child over. Then he reached across the table and tugged playfully on a lock of her black hair. “I know just what I would call you. The Seelie in the northern provinces, the ones of elven descent, celebrate a nature goddess with their stories. The goddess is called Glasmorra of the Wild Ones. She has green blood, and her lovely dark hair is long like yours, only hers is made entirely of actual ravens’ feathers.”

“Green blood.” Billie stared down at her wrists, blue eyes bright, imagination spinning. “And is she as pretty as her name?”

“Pretty *and* terrifying.”

“Ooo,” Billie cooed.

“When you get older,” Jonas said, tucking her ebony hair behind her rounded ear, “the humans are going to try to make you pin this all away. Don’t let them.”

“I won’t,” she vowed.

Mary reappeared, looking worn but less disheveled. “I’m so sorry, my lady,” she muttered.

“It truly was no bother,” Frances soothed.

“Billie, come,” Mary said severely, extending her hand. “I’ve calmed things down in the kitchens now.”

But Billie remained in her seat, ignoring her.

“Billie?” Frances tried. “Go with Cousin Mary.” To her surprise, the child didn’t move, didn’t even acknowledge her words. Billie always listened to her. It was one of many reasons Mary often sought out her help with the spirited youth.

“Glasmorra,” Jonas said, and the child’s head lifted immediately, “go with your cousin. There’s a good girl . . .”

Billie slid out of the chair and took Mary’s hand reluctantly. “I told her I was sorry,” she mumbled.

“We’ve talked about saying things that are rude to Cook,” Mary scolded. “You’re supposed to be a help to her in there. If you can’t say nice things, don’t say anything at all.”

“But Cook’s bottom *is* as big as the oven, and I didn’t *know* that was rude. I just wanted to find out how it got that way,” Billie protested as they sidled through the swinging side door that led to the servant’s hall. Mary’s response was lost as the door swung shut behind them.

Carrot and Branson filled wine glasses, laid them on the table beside the bowls of soup, then followed the girls out, likely to check on the main

course.

“Poor fledging, too fae-honest to fit in with the humans,” Jonas said, amused.

“Do you need to be told that you shouldn’t comment on the size of a lady’s posterior, or have you already grasped that one out in the wild?” Frances teased.

“You can leave that off the lesson plan,” Jonas said. “I already know that women are often embarrassed about things they should be proud of.” He stared at her pointedly. “Like when they attempt to hide their lush body beneath a heavy shawl despite the spring heat.”

“I’m not embarrassed about myself.” Frances flushed. She lifted her spoon and stirred her soup, spotting her blurry reflection in the watery broth. Her hair was askew, probably from Jonas’s barbaric pawing earlier—tantalizingly barbaric pawing. Smoothing back the wild curls only made it worse. “It can be difficult balancing the expectations of two very different peoples. I tire of the comments, even when they’re well-meaning.”

“Then to hell with both of them. You should listen to me. I know a little something about this.”

“You do not,” Frances scoffed. “You are *all* fae, all the time.”

He poked through the vegetables in his soup, finding a piece of meat and spearing it with his fork, ignoring the small spoon she tried again to hand him. “I am fae, but I’m also too wealthy to fit in amongst the common folk and too common to fit in amongst the nobility.”

“Hmm, that would be a challenge.” Frances had never thought of it that way, but he made a valid point. Because he hadn’t picked up on any of her

subtler hints, she snatched his dinner fork from him and stowed it beside hers for safe-keeping.

“If I tried to abide by both, I’d lose my mind. So I abide by myself.” A line formed between his brows, perplexed by the amount of flatware around his bowl.

She pointed out the soup spoon again, tapping on it. “When you came into your wealth, did you lose many relationships?”

“Cut them loose, yes. All of my relationships have had an expiration date.” As the warning in his words sunk deeply into Frances, he attempted to lift the bowl to his lips to taste the broth.

She put a hand on his arm and stopped him, shaking her head.

With a frown, he lowered the crystal and used his spoon instead—the wrong spoon. “It was fun at first, being a wealthy man with many friends, funding all of our good times. But then I accidentally turned myself into the answer to their every problem. If I wasn’t willing to bend over and use my coin to fix their issues or every crisis of their favorite aunt’s-cousin’s-mother’s-sweetheart, then I wasn’t a friend. That grows tiresome after a while. I hadn’t realized how shallow most of those relationships were, but I’m better for being rid of them.”

“You are.” She cringed when he slurped his soup. “My dear,” she said gently, “one of the goals of sharing a meal with others politely is to attempt to make as little noise as possible.”

“Well, if you’d let me drink out of the bowl, you’d hear me less.”

“Please don’t drink out of any bowls at our wedding. I’ll have to pretend I don’t know you.”

He attempted to take in his next spoonful quietly. He was nearly successful. “In mortal ceremonies, isn’t there a special table for the bride

and groom to sit all by themselves while the other humans eat and moon over them?”

“Oh, there is, and I’ll still pretend I don’t know you.”

They grinned at each other.

Chapter 11



Jonas,

I've found a beautiful replacement option for floral arrangements that won't assault your senses: flowers made of paper and silk. They're lovely, but as they have to be fashioned by hand, they're more expensive.

I'll allow you to decide which you prefer.

Frances

Frances,

We are hours apart from one another, but I bet if you listen hard enough, you can still hear me groaning.

I suggest there be no florals at all. Problem solved. Wait no longer.

Jonas

Jonas,

I have it on good authority that the bride wants florals at her wedding.

Frances

Frances,

*Then my bride shall have florals. Silk and paper sounds best.
Lavender is tolerable in low doses.*

Jonas

* * *

Jonas

Jonas hardly recognized Whiteholm as his carriage pulled up the drive the day of his wedding. The beds of roses that once flanked the stone front had been moved, revealing thick patches of strawberries and grapevines and raspberry bushes. Tables and benches decorated the lawn, all turned to face a small round table set up on a circular stage. Per the instructions sent to him by his bride-to-be, he arrived several hours before the meal would begin.

Late afternoon sunlight had his Lunar eyes watering as he climbed from the carriage. Footmen, twins he recognized, greeted him on the drive and helped themselves to his luggage, toting a heavy chest of his things between them. Cat twisted in his jacket pocket, meowing low. She was getting too big to fit in there.

Mr. Archer, the middle-aged butler, greeted him politely in the foyer. A man of few words, he handed Jonas a long match. He ignited the incense at the altar of the Divine Day, then the butler guided him up a set of grand winding stairs to the second floor and the master bedroom at the top.

“And good luck to you, sir,” Mr. Archer said before shutting him inside.

When Jonas was finally alone with his things, he took in the opulent space. Even after he’d come into his wealth, the grandest home he’d lived in was an old brownstone where he spent little time. Anything larger than that made him feel like he was swimming in wasteful open space.

Everything about his new bedroom was too large. Too ornate. The bed was immense, covered in too many pillows and billowy bedding. Perhaps he’d be grateful for all that room soon enough when he was sharing it with another.

At that moment, his nerves caught up to him. They ate at him, and his gut twisted sharply.

He scooped Cat out of his pocket and held her in the crook of his arm. Together they watched the servants through the front-facing window. Humans readied chairs and benches below, laying out decorations of silk flowers and white and pink ribbon, the makings of a mortal marriage feast.

For the first time, he got the feeling he wasn’t just getting a house and a wife and the title he craved. He was about to also adopt that zoological collection of mortals whose fates he would soon be responsible for. Upon his first visit, he’d been told many of the workers were seasonal or there for the updates, but there were even more of them now somehow. They’d multiplied on the estate.

If he had any sense, he’d have kidnapped his bride like a proper fae and stolen them both away from all that obligation.

The lightest knock at the door caught his keen senses. He sat Cat down on the floor and went to open it. Jonas made it two steps before he felt a

pull in the bond and knew immediately who was waiting for him on the other side.

“Come in, Frances.” His smile was reflexive.

The door opened a crack. Frances stuck her head in. “You’re not supposed to see me yet. I know I’m breaking tradition, but . . .” She bit her lip.

Jonas scoffed at her. “Mortal traditions. Not mine. Come in.”

She eased into the room. Her dark curls were elegantly braided and pinned up, the plaits woven with lace and pearls. Her lips were painted a ruby red that brought out the jewel tones of her eyes. Powder had been added to her hair to make it shimmer. She fisted her hands in the skirts of her dressing robe.

“I’ve never been so damn nervous in all my life,” she confessed, voice small. “I’ve done a terribly silly thing, and now I need your help.”

And just like that, the nerves that ate at him evaporated in the face of her disquiet. Why her discomfort dissolved his, he couldn’t fathom. For whatever reason, the desire to rid her of her anxieties brought his to a complete standstill. “What silly thing have you done?”

“It’ll be easier if I show you.” Frances reopened the door and glanced out into the hall before slipping into the corridor. “Come along.”

Cat trotted after them, her claws catching gently on the carpets.

“I didn’t think very many guests would come today,” Frances said, worrying her skirts, “what with our reputations and all. But apparently—or perhaps because of those reputations—we’re going to have quite the full house soon. The accepted invitations just kept pouring in. There’s so much pressure now to make a good impression, to try and right some of the

things I've ruined." Frances stood before the oak door of her room, eyes squeezed shut. "I couldn't choose. I tried and tried."

Jonas thought he understood then. He took her small hand in his. "Just show me."

"Please don't be cross."

"I'm not cross," he said, and he wasn't. He understood completely the pressure she described, knew exactly what it was like to crave the good opinion of someone who refused to give it. It was the same pressure that had weighed him down as a boy who'd wanted so desperately to get his father to pay attention to him, to stop disappearing all the time. There was nothing to be done for it, he knew, but that was a hard-learned lesson.

"I couldn't choose." The door at her back creaked as she pushed it open. "So I bought all of them."

Tulle and silk and lace and white beading caught his eye first. Four wedding dresses hung about the room, another opulent space not quite as large as the master's chambers, this one done up in pale yellows and creams. He studied each of them. The dresses were glamorous and bright, the detailing intricate enough they probably cost a seamstress her sight. There was no doubt she'd be gorgeous in any of them, but—

"They look so uncomfortable," he noted, his nose wrinkling.

Frances let out a shuttered breath. "Gods above, they are. But they're the height of current fashion and I can't choose. Mary and the maids all have different opinions on which is their favorite. Even my father couldn't help me pick. He just kept insisting I looked lovely in all of them, which is sweet but not helpful. Ugh, I miss the older fashions. They were much more comfortable. I can't wait for this new obsession with perfect silhouettes to end."

“Then, is the problem that you don’t want to wear *any* of them?”

Frances’s chin dropped to her chest. “But I’m *supposed* to wear them. Er, one of them. Not all four.”

“And what about that one?” Jonas pointed to the silk ensemble that hung from the mirror in the back. “That’s what I’ll be wearing.”

“The fae robes for the ceremony? I’m not supposed to put those on until—”

“Frances, you are as much fae as you are human. You try so hard to please everyone, but there’s no sense in it. You simply can’t. You can only please yourself.” He could see the gears turning in her mind as his words sunk in. Wanting to further his point, he tugged her hand in his, escorting her to the mirror. “Touch it,” he commanded.

“Oh, but I already know how soft it is.”

Jonas lifted their joined hands and brushed her fingers against the hem of the midnight blue robe. “Do you want to be swathed in that for hours, or beads and boning?”

She sighed. “Most of our guests will be human. There are expectations.”

“To hell with all that. Do what *you* want for once. Say it, Frances.” Hands on her arms, he turned her toward the mirror, centering her in it. Behind her, his long lean form dwarfed hers in the frame. “Say ‘to hell with it.’ I *dare* you.”

She giggled at his child-like insistence. Then something passed over her expression, a new resolve. She lifted her chin. “To *hell* with all that.”

He patted her arms. “That’s my girl.”

* * *

Jonas sat beside his bride on the small stage as more and more guests filtered onto the grounds to drop a gift before them before helping themselves to the feast provided. She looked lush in her loose midnight blue robes and comfortable, tucked in beside him.

Briefly, he wondered about Cat and hoped she wasn't giving little Glasmorra too much trouble. She seemed to mind the girl better than anyone else as of yet, but it had been a while since he'd seen them running through the grass together.

A breeze picked up, blowing the scent of hot soup, roasted potatoes, and fresh fruit under his nose.

"Why seat us at a table at all if we aren't allowed to eat up here?" Jonas groaned as another mortal couple flitted by.

"We're supposed to be attentive to the guests and too busy staring into each other's eyes, I think. I warned you to eat before it started," she said. "You did, didn't you?"

"I did. I'm just not very good at being denied things. Especially food." The denial made him feel itchy all over. It made him almost as uncomfortable as the pile of presents he hadn't earned, offered by strangers he didn't know.

"Oh, I see." Frances's hazel gaze went wide. Hers wasn't quite as sensitive as his to the evening sunlight, a gift of her shared heritage. "Because of your start on Dimmet Street?" she guessed.

Jonas wiped the corners of his burning eyes with his silk sleeve and grinned. "Someone's been looking into me. I'm flattered. Yes, Dimmet Street."

“Before I came to the matchmaker’s hall, I learned as much as I could about you, of course.” She chewed her cheek, playing a gloved finger tentatively over the fine linen tablecloth. “It’s not a very nice street.”

It amused him that she seemed so timid about discussing his past. He wasn’t timid about it at all. It was life for common people like him. Why should he act embarrassed? “It isn’t a nice place. Even centuries ago, it wasn’t. But I learned a lot on that street, and eventually it made me a wealthy man, and for that I’m grateful.”

Jonas had only been a wealthy man for the last decade or so. After years of poverty, it still shocked him how quickly a man’s fortune could change.

“Your pawn shop,” she said, her voice growing in confidence. “I have always wondered how you got the funding to start one. That was a detail I couldn’t find when I went on the hunt.”

Jonas chuckled. “I sold a very wealthy man a feather.”

“A feather?” A sweet little wrinkle formed between her brows. He wanted to brush his lips over that fine line. “An expensive feather?”

“Expensive for him.” Jonas grinned. “I called it a Feather of Fortune.” Humans were rather obsessed with the notion of good luck.

Frances gasped. “Then you lied to him.” She hid her sniggering behind her hand and lowered her voice. “But fae aren’t supposed to tell lies.”

“Technically, I didn’t tell a single lie.” He shrugged his shoulders, his sarcastic smile slipping sideways. “But I am a trickster. So I tricked.”

“Tell me everything.” She wove her arm through his as another guest dropped a small, wrapped package on the growing pile, then went on to find a table beside a friend. Steaming helpings were brought out to them.

Jonas was grateful for the distraction France's touch provided. He didn't want to think about the food he wasn't allowed to have.

"Ten years ago," Jonas began, "a wealthy human owned most of the market stalls on Dimmet Street. He walked through every morning at the same time to check on them. For several weeks, I made sure I interacted with him in torn, dirty garbs as a beggar, pleading for scraps or coin." Then because Jonas couldn't resist, he put an arm over her shoulders and dropped a light kiss on that wrinkle between her brows.

Frances shivered at the contact, and the bond rejoiced. "Then what happened?" she prompted.

"I made sure the next time he saw me I was dressed like a prince."

Frances snorted. "I can't imagine that."

"My friend Susan helped me with the clothes," he admitted. "She was a working girl at a tavern and had collected a wide variety of things men had left behind. Anyway, I cut in front of the owner again the next day, not as a beggar, but as a wealthy man. I see the recognition in his eyes, then I pull my feather of fortune from my pocket, and I stroke it lovingly, like this." He laid his free hand on her knee, his thumb roving across the rounded joint, earning another delightful shiver from his mate. "Susie comes over as planned, demands I sell her my lucky feather because haven't I had enough good fortune? I should share it, she says. I tell her to get lost, and I've got his attention now."

"So wickedly clever," Frances said.

He flashed her his teeth, his smile equally wicked. "The rich man, his name was Barton—"

"As in the Barton family that owns all those factories?"

“The very same ones. Barton pulls me aside and asks what I want for the lucky feather.” Jonas can still picture the man with the barrel chest, the eager look in his deep-set eyes. “I tell him the truth. ‘It’s just a feather.’ But the truth and my refusal to sell it at first has him even more convinced that it’s something special, something I’m trying to hide. He gives me everything in his purse just to hold it. I hand it over, he strokes it a few times, and he’s sold, thinks he can feel the luck on it. He takes me to his home and pays me a fortune to keep it. More than enough to open a pawn shop and make a few mistakes along the way.”

“Oh, but didn’t that come back to hurt you eventually? I mean, surely he realized it wasn’t lucky after all.”

“That’s the best part.” He leaned in closer, and both neglected to acknowledge the next guests who ambled by, too caught up in the story. “Later that same week, there’s an announcement in the papers: Barton’s engaged. Apparently, that feather gave him the courage he needed to finally make a move on his lady. When I opened my shop months later, he visited me and thanked me for my Feather of Fortune. He said it was the best purchase he’d ever made.”

“What an excellent story.” Frances leaned against him. “I never thought I’d say that about grifting, but I’m genuinely moved.”

“Susan still thinks it might have actually been a lucky feather. Lucky for both of us, but that’s mortal nonsense.”

“I’m not so sure,” Frances said, smiling and waving at the couple that greeted her by name.

Iso came bounding out of the strawberry patch, chasing a rabbit. A group of children erupted into giggles and pursued them, Cat and Glasmorra bringing up the rear.

“I thought Iso was going to keep to her hoard this evening?” Jonas asked. “I thought you didn’t want to upset the humans with a reminder that you’re a *scary* witch?”

“Earlier today, a friend of mine had some wise words for me on that.” Frances laid a hand over the top of his. “‘To hell with all of it,’ he said.”

She stood, resolve stiffening her spine. She caught the attention of two footmen, who came promptly at a wave from her. Jonas watched, baffled.

“The Lord of Whiteholm is hungry,” she told them. “Please bring him a little of everything to try.”

The footmen hesitated only a moment, tradition slowing their response. Without a word against their lady, they nodded their understanding and left to prepare a tray.

“To hell with all of it, indeed,” Jonas said, amused.

* * *

The ceremony started at dusk, as the sun sunk below the horizon and the skies filled with the pastel colors of spring. Jonas stood across from Frances in the master bedroom on a special rounded quilt brought by the mage performing the blessing. It was fashioned to look like the sun and moon coming together beside their marital bed. Jonas stood on the moon, Frances on the sun.

A mortal magistrate collected signatures on a formal document, legalizing their marriage. The document was signed by her father, the earl. Jonas didn’t have family to sign for him, so Mr. Archer, the butler, filled in as a witness. Even Iso was allowed to participate. The room was lit with

multiple candles in a deep blue that matched their robes. Iso ignited them all.

The mage, a Lunar fae with curled horns like a ram, performed a song, seeking the blessing of the Night Mother, and the room filled with the scent of incense—moon magic.

Jonas took his bride's hands at the wrists and touched his brow to hers, the fae sign for deference and affection. Frances rose up on her toes and kissed his lips, the mortal way to finalize a marriage. Jonas had to admit the human way was better, adding that one to his growing list of reasons mortals weren't as terrible as he often insisted.

The magistrate pronounced them husband and wife, and the intimate crowd of loved ones filtered out of his bedroom.

The curtains were drawn, the door was shut, and the candles cast a gentle glow about the room. The sound of footfalls lessened in the corridor. The feast continued outside, though most of the mortal guests left as the sun dimmed.

His bride looked positively shaken as he moved to lock the door. "Nervous?" he guessed.

"It's the bond," she confessed, her voice small.

Jonas loosened his silk belt and worked off the top layer of his robe. "This is the moment I've been waiting for."

Frances crossed her arms, fisting the front of her robe so hard her little knuckles went white.

Stripped down to his linen underthings, he dropped onto the corner of the mattress and sunk in. It was as soft and springy as it looked. "Would you help me with my boots?" He lifted his foot. "The lacing is a pain."

“Um, of course.” She crossed to him, and with trembling fingers, she helped him unknot the laces and pull off the tall boots.

The bond liked that. It thrummed, warm and inviting in his chest. She too let out a pleased sigh. He patted the space beside him. “Have a seat. I’ll help you with your hair.” Another pulse from the bond, approving the idea.

“Oh?” She trapped her bottom lip in her teeth. “I could have one of the girls do that . . .”

“Nonsense. I want to do it.” He waited patiently for her to sit beside him. Her shoulders were stiff, her spine straight as a post. Gently, he loosened the pins that held up her braids, the lacing and pearls too. Long plaits unwound and spilled down her back like a glossy river of ink.

She unknotted her silk belt, letting the robe fall open. Jonas helped her out of it, working the layers off her taut shoulders. Silk spilled to the floor in a shimmering blue heap, leaving her in nothing but her chiffon chemise. The fabric was so light he could almost see through it. His hands returned to her shoulders, gently squeezing the tension out of them.

Frances’s head fell forward with a heaving breath as he worked his thumbs through the knots of tight muscle in the base of her neck.

“Now, the moment I’ve been so patient for,” he said, crawling toward the pillows. Frances’s body immediately went rigid, and Jonas couldn’t stop grinning at her expense. “Time for a well-earned nap.”

Chapter 12



Frances

“**A** . . . a *nap*?” Her voice was breathier than she wanted it to be. Relief and disappointment rolled through her in equal measures. “But I thought . . .”

Jonas pulled back the covers and crawled beneath them. “Plenty of time later for all the rest. I’m exhausted, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she gasped, a smile tugging up the corners of her mouth. “I’ll let you sleep.”

She started to stand. He caught her arm. “You’re going to make me sleep in here alone? In this strange place? In this massive bed clearly made for two . . . or three?”

Candlelight illuminated the side of his face, warming his brown skin. His eyes were pleading, his smile sweet and beckoning. The bond had her heart in a vice, threatening to squeeze.

“Definitely only two, please,” she said playfully.

“Spoilsport.”

“I forgot. You like to snuggle.”

“Shh,” he hissed. “Some poor mortal might hear you, and then I’ll have to kill them.” He tugged on her hand, and she felt the resistance melt from her body, the bond’s grip on her heart loosening.

She sat on the bed, shifting the mattress with her weight. “I suppose . . . I mean, we were just married and all . . .”

“That’s right.” He opened the blankets to her.

Carefully she lay next to him, keeping to her side, as close to the edge of the bed as possible. He chuckled at her, and it brought out her smile. She supposed she was being silly. It wasn’t as though she was some clueless virgin, and Jonas had touched her before much more intimately than this. She hadn’t earned her reputation with Glen, but she’d had other lovers in her long life.

None of them had been anything like Jonas, though. There hadn’t been a growing bond pumping through her, as enticing as it was intimidating. There just wasn’t another man like Jonas, period. A self-made person, as honest as he was also a trickster. Someone who was simultaneously as a part of two very different worlds as she was.

No one understood her quite like he did.

Jonas wrapped an arm around her waist, his hand spreading across her belly. He pulled her into his body, fitting all her curves against the hard planes of his chest and thighs, and almost immediately the tension eased out of her again. The panic the bond induced quieted. She shifted her weight, finding a spot for her cheek on the pillows.

Stars above, she really was tired. The desire to sleep made her eyes heavy.

“This was a brilliant idea,” she said.

But Jonas was already snoring lightly, dead to the world.

She laid her arm over his, closed her eyes, and joined him.

* * *

Frances dreamed vivid, lust-fueled dreams of heat and skin and lips. It wasn't the first bond-induced dream she'd had of her mate, but it was certainly the most realistic. Each moment passed in a blur, then an image of her sucking on his neck, right above his pulse, swam into view. She awoke hot, her chemise pulled up to her hips, lying in the arms of her husband, her face buried in his throat. Need throbbed between her thighs.

He was awake too, his arms encircling her, palms gliding down her back, stopping at the curves of her bottom and squeezing.

"Oh, gods," Frances gasped. She yanked aside the loose collar of his linen shirt, revealing marks where her lips had been busy. "I . . . I bruised you. I thought I was just dreaming."

"I'm not complaining." His voice was gravel. Jonas pulled her over him and rolled onto his back. "Suck on my neck all you like."

Her hair fell over her shoulder, curtaining one side of her face. "Did I hurt you?" Worry and lust fought for purchase.

"No." His brown eyes were liquid fire. The corner of his mouth twitched. "You're welcome to do it again." His hands caressed her back, then returned to her bottom, squeezing, kneading.

Frances straddled his hips, felt his hot length pressing against the seam of his under-breeches. His fingers worked quickly, shoving down her drawers and raking back up the sides of her chemise, so the chiffon skirts pooled at her waist, out of the way. She kicked off her drawers and seated herself above the bulge of his erection.

Jonas moaned.

He was hot through the linen. Her body responded, more heat pooling in her sex. His clever hands were at it again, pulling down the straps of her

chemise, exposing her breasts. He lifted his knees, seating her higher up his body, bringing her breasts to his face. Jonas lavished each of them with attention, taking her nipples one at a time into his eager mouth.

Frances moved her hips over his, rubbing that hard heat against her exposed sex. She felt each long pull of his lips on her nipples, each stroke and squeeze in a building pressure behind her navel. Muscles clenched low in her belly.

“Oh gods,” she panted. “Oh, fuck . . .”

And just like that she was seeing stars. Her orgasm crashed over her, and she collapsed against him.

Jonas released her breast, her nipple dark pink and glossy. “You didn’t swoon. I’m losing my touch.”

Her breathy laugh shook her shoulders. “I think you’re doing just fine.”

Jonas rolled her onto her back, and he slid his body between her thighs. The blissful pulses of her climax eased away. She opened for him, ready to take him, but to her surprise, he didn’t remove his breeches.

Instead, he put her legs over his shoulders and pulled her to the center of the bed. Her stomach swooped, and her heart jumped. Then he sunk between her thighs and shoved up the hem of her chemise. Frances was too relaxed to feel any shame at being so exposed to him. He kissed her belly, his nose roving lower.

“Oh, wait . . .” He wasn’t going to kiss her *there* was he? “W-what are you doing?”

She felt the heat of his chuckle right over her most intimate place, and it occurred to her that more attention there would be pleasant indeed but . . . his mouth? She’d never heard of such a thing. It seemed barbaric.

But also absolutely captivating.

“Have you never been kissed here before?” he asked, his breath stirring the dark curls between her legs.

“No. Never.” Her voice tremored.

“I want to taste you. Right here.” He ran a thumb over the top of her sex. Then he slid a finger deep inside her opening. She was wet and ready, and she moaned. “And I want my tongue deep in here.”

“And you . . . like that?”

“Yes!” His insistence reverberated through the bond, his excitement and her growing need winding together into one beating pulse.

“All right,” she breathed.

Jonas’s enthusiasm for her breasts was nothing to the passion he showed her pussy. He lapped at her clit, then sucked that bud of nerves like a starving man. When his tongue pushed up inside her entrance, she grabbed his horns and stroked them.

“Jonas!” Her cry was loud enough half the house likely heard it, but she had no energy to spare for propriety. She wanted more of her mate, more of his tongue fucking her, then licking her aching clit.

He really was a barbarian.

And she loved it.

As pressure began to build behind her navel once more, Jonas appeared to reach a breaking point. He shucked his breeches and fisted his shaft. The wet head of his cock was at her entrance, and her hips jerked up to meet his thrust.

They groaned loud and low together. *Oh gods*. He was thick and solid. He filled her to bursting. And when he moved, her whole world shifted on its axis. He placed her legs back over his shoulders. His thrusts were hard

and steady, and his thumb returned to the top of her sex, rubbing quick circles into her needy flesh.

She came with a cry.

Jonas rolled her onto her stomach after that. “When I spend, where do you want it?”

“All over me,” she said softly, her face buried in the blankets, her body too used up to lift her head.

“Perfect answer.” He pumped into her, their bodies slapping together wetly. She felt claimed, taken.

She felt whole.

He pulled out and lifted her chemise higher. She watched him fisting his cock, then hot, wet come hit her back, and the bond beat against the cage of her ribs. Jonas fell beside her with a satisfied grunt, chest heaving.

Frances laughed at the absolutely wild thing they’d just done. He chortled with her. After a moment, he wiped up the mess he’d made with the ends of her chemise, then he helped her out of it. He stripped off his linen shirt next. The clothing was added to the pool of silk and hairpins on the floor.

Jonas held her to his chest, skin to skin. They snoozed in each other’s arms.

But not for long.

Frances had no idea how much time had passed. Her sleep had been quiet and dreamless.

Her husband nuzzled her neck, and her lashes fluttered. “Are you awake?”

“A little.” She grinned dozily into the dark. Most of the candles had gone out.

“I know you said only the once, but we never really specified what ‘the once’ meant.” he noted. “Once I’m inside you? Once I leave the bed?”

“And it is still our wedding night,” she added helpfully.

Jonas moved her onto her back, sliding his body between her thighs. “You make an excellent point, Lady Moen.”

* * *

Frances returned to her own bedroom the next day, certain that she’d been so thoroughly undone, she’d never be able to stay away from her husband’s room for long, whatever her defiant declarations of the past.

Even if her soul hurt afterward.

The construction finishing up around the main house kept her distracted for most of that week. Jonas stayed busy learning routines around Whiteholm and meeting staff. He was surprisingly kind to all the humans she introduced him to, not making a single sarcastic comment about any of them—in front of them.

To calm herself when the bond ache triggered by her befuddled instincts flared, she’d repeat a mantra of truths: Jonas didn’t want a love match. He was a trickster no wise woman would ever entrust with her heart. And she couldn’t complete their bond, even if that was something they both wanted—which it wasn’t.

It wasn’t! He’d said so himself and so had she. Multiple times. What she was experiencing now was nothing more than a side effect of bond lust.

Bond lust and his extremely talented fingers.

And tongue.

And cock.

Frances made it the entire week without breaking. She needed the reprieve from the panic and pain his proximity so often caused. Except now his distance, even the very small distance of one hallway, triggered a very different sort of ache in her chest, one she struggled to process.

All week, just before sunrise, Jonas would allow her to retreat from him with the most knowing grin. He had unraveled her so completely, she felt like a loose spool of yarn. And he *knew* it. Gods, that made it worse. She wanted to grumble at him that he had vastly more experience on matters of pleasure, so of course she'd been undone. It wasn't a failing on her part . . . was it? She'd thought she understood the mysteries of intimacy before, but now she'd come to the realization that her knowledge on the matter was entirely elementary.

He'd fought so hard to teach her a lesson with his silly pranks during their courting. Well, now he'd finally taught her something: she was ill-equipped in the bedroom. He had bested her at last.

As he predicted, she'd benefitted greatly from his experience, but night in and night out that godsdamned smug smirk of his crawled right under her skin, goading her, making her wish to cast aside every human rule she'd been raised with, to overcome him the way she had before when he'd attempted to teach her a blasted lesson.

Next time they came together, she wouldn't be the only one undone, she vowed.

The following evening, after he left to attend to business, she left for the city as well, fueled by determination. She arrived on Main Street just before midnight. The Gilded Boot—the most respectable brothel in all the

Row—was full of clients, mostly men, but a few couples, some fae, some human. For moral support, she'd brought Iso with her in her carpet bag.

The Lady of Whiteholm hovered in the doorway, chewing on her cheek, uncertainty taking root. She wanted to embrace the notion of casting aside mortal society's unequal perceptions, but perhaps this was a step too far. Perhaps she shouldn't have jumped into the deep end quite so recklessly.

Immediately, she felt as though she didn't belong. Eyes turned toward her. The heat of all those gazes warmed her. She'd been to drinking establishments before when she was much, much younger and far more careless, but this was something else entirely. Perhaps coming here was a very bad idea.

But then a courtesan moved toward her, a lovely woman with a warm complexion, a full figure, and a smile so friendly her fears eased.

"Are you looking for company, love?" the courtesan asked.

Frances cleared her throat. "Yes . . . er, sort of . . ."

"I'm Margot." She hooked an arm through Frances's and guided her into the parlor, away from the doors. The courtesan pointed to the well-dressed blonde who sat under a large blackboard hanging from the adjacent wall. "That's Susie Boots. She and I own this house."

Susie blew a kiss at them.

Frances pulled her carpet bag up higher on her shoulder, her cheeks growing hot. "I'm Frances . . . Oh, was I supposed to give a false name?"

Margot cackled at the ceiling. Her dark curls tumbled down her back, as free and springy as the courtesan's steps. She pulled Frances into a seat near the bar. "You are too precious for words. I take it this is your first time at an establishment like ours?"

Frances swallowed. “Definitely.”

“Susie and I are honored to have you.” Another winning smile from Margot sparkled in the gaslights. “Why was tonight the night for adventure, I wonder?”

“Recently I learned that when it comes to the, er, bedroom, I’m woefully ill-equipped, and I hoped this might be the best place to receive a lesson. I would pay you, of course, for your instruction.” Frances propped the carpet bag in her lap, and Iso stuck her head out, peering around the room a moment before slinking back inside.

“Frances . . .” Margot said thoughtfully, eyeing her dragon familiar. “You wouldn’t happen to be the woman who captured the heart of Jonas Moen, would you?”

“Oh?” Frances was unaccustomed to being known for anything other than being a wanton witch. “I wouldn’t say I’ve captured his heart.” She frowned down at the round table between them. They’d been quite open with others about their marriage being one of convenience. Surely this courtesan had heard the same.

Margot grinned ear to ear. “Jonas has dropped by here three or four times since your engagement was announced. Each time he visits, he has a beer, chats with Susie, but never leaves the parlor. He never asks the ladies for company anymore.”

“He doesn’t?” Frances blinked at her, warmth shooting through her heart, echoed by a prickling pain in her soul. “What about the men?”

“Not the men either. I’d say you’ve certainly captured *something* of his,” Margot said, raising her brows suggestively. “Even if you haven’t as much experience, as you say. Are you sure you need my help?”

Told you so, Iso said. What's got ahold of the two of you is more complicated than bond lust.

It took a moment for Frances to gather her thoughts. She didn't know what to make of this news. She'd given him permission to hire courtesans. He'd had a reputation of bedding them before. Why would he stop?

He couldn't have *feelings* for her? Attraction and compatibility were one thing, but romantic feelings were— No, that was a silly thought. A silly thought she wouldn't trust, because she shouldn't fully trust her trickster husband, and she certainly couldn't trust her own heart. Her own heart had made such bad choices in the past.

"Um, yes," Frances managed, dropping her voice. "I do still need your help. You see, after we were wed . . . I was quite undone. And he was quite, well, smug about it."

"Oh." Margot's eyes went big and round. "We can't have that."

"I know it sounds silly—"

"Not at all." Margot tossed her thumb over her shoulder. "See the board behind me there? The one above Susie?"

"The one with the poem about the buxom barmaid?"

Margot giggled. "That's the one. The numbers above it ain't got a thing to do with drink orders. Susie and I have a bet going on who can earn the most half-pieces for showing their tits to patrons. I'm just as competitive as you, love, and I completely understand your plight. I'm happy to help you turn your husband witless. Maybe humble him just a smidge. Jonas could use a dose of that."

"Ah, according to the board, there's a tie." Frances fished around in her carpet bag. Iso found the coin needed and handed it up between her claws. "Thank you, Iso." Frances slid the half-piece across the table.

“How considerate.” Margot plucked up the tip and tucked it away in her skirts. Then she pulled down her neckline, exposing her full breasts.

“Lovely,” Frances said politely, her face and ears burning.

Margot fixed the front of her dress, her smirk salacious. “Put another one down for me, Susie,” she called behind her. Then she pointed to the men who lounged together in the back corner, two courtesans—one fae, the other human—both of whom had the most sinful smiles. “Shall I bring one of them along to help with the lesson?”

Iso’s head popped out of the lip of the bag so quickly she sent a ball of yarn flying. *Please say yes.*

“Not this time,” Frances said, maneuvering under the table to capture the runaway ball. She tossed it back into her bag. “I think your instruction, Margot— Ouch.” Frances bumped her head on the underside of the table. She rubbed at the ache as she righted herself. “Ahem, I think a conversation with you will be more than adequate to suit my needs.”

“It’ll be more comfortable having this conversation upstairs. Careful now.” Margot rose gracefully out of her chair, and Frances followed. The courtesan slipped an arm over France’s shoulders and guided her back toward the foyer. As they walked, Margot glanced down the neckline of Frances’s dress. “Has anyone told you that you have fantastic tits?”

Frances burst out laughing. “I have heard that a time or two now.”

“Susie and I would never enter a bet against you. With beauties like those, this will be a very easy lesson. You’ll see. Jonas won’t know what hit him.”

Chapter 13



Jonas,

In my last correspondence with Dr. Bandile, he mentioned that he hasn't seen our mutual friend, Mr. Ramsey, in quite some time. If you see him around Ferrywick Street, would you please send him to the medical dispensary? I'm worried about him.

In exchange for your help, I'm willing to reduce the cost of décor updates in the sitting rooms by 10%. I'll add it to our agreement.

Please let me know if you find him.

Frances

* * *

Jonas

Jonas was beyond frustrated. He'd just finalized the purchase of a ripe piece of farmland to the east of his new estate. The rents alone would fetch him a pretty profit, and yet there he was, stewing on the street outside his offices in the morning sunlight, angry that his efforts to find a

certain piece of jewelry had been unsuccessful. Not even a good bargain could cheer him.

He was sick and tired of watching his wife grab at her neck in moments of contemplation, reaching for a charm that he had once taken from her. He could still remember the string of pearls. He'd hesitated to buy them from the earl because the memory flat—the small, rounded charm at the center—was engraved with her mother's name. Selling it would be very difficult.

But Jonas was an expert at selling difficult things. *Damn him*, he cursed his former self.

He'd visited several of the shops where he'd hocked the earl's wares, and the charm was in none of them. And now he was having the same terrible luck at finding the street man, Mr. Ramsey.

Cat meowed up at him from the walkway. She was now too big to fit in his pocket and had grown even fluffier. "We'll get you something to eat as soon as we find Mr. Ramsey."

Across the street, one of the flower shop delivery workers appeared in the opening to an alleyway. The Unseelie fae with the scaled skin waved his muscled arms over his head. "This way, Lord Moen. I think I've found him."

Jonas looked both ways, then jogged across the street. Cat bounded after him, moving like a cloud with small sticks for legs. The Unseelie delivery workers had impressed him, and so he now made use of them in various creative ways.

"Where is he?" Jonas asked.

The worker gestured for him to follow. "I spotted the man you described near Dimmet Street, and I sent my brother to collect a hackney.

This way past the Bolton factories is a shortcut.”

Jonas was familiar with all the shortcuts—most of which were quite dangerous—to that particular street. But sure enough, as they ambled down another alley, there Mr. Ramsey was, same mismatched clothing, face now clear of warts.

He was curled up on a pallet not far from the trash bins.

Jonas kicked the pallet, and Mr. Ramsey stammered awake.

“You’ve an appointment with Dr. Bandile,” Jonas said, reaching down and helping the mortal to his feet.

“Have I what now?” Mr. Ramsey spluttered.

He was limping again, and it was worse this time. A hackney appeared at the edge of the alley. Jonas put an arm over Mr. Ramsey’s shoulders and guided him toward it.

“Your foot,” Jonas said. “You haven’t been taking care of it. Now you have to.”

Mr. Ramsey blinked at him. “Why’s I got to, sir?”

The Unseelie worker rushed ahead and opened the carriage door.

“Because if something bad happens to you, my wife will be sad.” They reached the cab, and Jonas helped him into the back. “She’s allowed to be annoyed. Lady Moen is even allowed to be angry, Mr. Ramsey, but she’s not allowed to be sad.”

“Ha. I take your meaning, sir. I’ll see the doctor if you’ve got something for me.” Mr. Ramsey rubbed his fingers together, the signal for coin.

Jonas dug a copper crescent out of his pocket. Mr. Ramsey reached for it. Jonas handed it to the delivery worker who climbed in across from him. “If he sees the doctor, then he can have it.”

The worker took the coin and closed the door. Jonas told the driver where to go, and the hackney set off. He was about to make his way back toward Ferrywick when the carriage cleared the corner and the pawn shop there came into view.

It had once been his old shop, but he'd sold it ages ago. It had changed hands a number of times since then.

"We're already here," he told Cat. "Might as well check and see if it winded up there."

A bell chimed over the narrow door as they entered.

"I'm just about to lock up for the day, and no pets," the pawnbroker grunted, a slender Lunar fae man with a heavy beard and a bushy fox tail.

"I don't recommend telling her no," Jonas warned, and Cat hissed. "I'll be out of here quickly. I just need to have a look."

"Whatever she damages, you're buying," the pawnbroker huffed.

The shelves inside the shop were stuffed full of wares with little organization. The jewelry section was even more of a mess, but then Jonas glanced behind the counter where the pawnbroker leaned, and he spotted the string of pearls.

The bell chimed—another patron had entered. Cat yowled.

Jonas pointed to the pearls. "How much do you want for those?"

"The charm is engraved," the pawnbroker warned. "It served as one of those human memory flats they use to remind them to call on their dead ancestors in their prayers."

"Refuse to sell to this man," came a familiar voice from the threshold, "and I'll make it worth your while, Leif."

Jonas turned to find Glen Freest standing just behind him, wearing a felt hat over his blue hair, looking every bit the arrogant ass Jonas

remembered him to be. Cat climbed onto his boot, snowy fur standing on end, back bowed.

Leif crossed slender arms over his chest. "I'm listening, Lord Freest. Go on."

"You still haven't learned your lesson," Jonas snarled. "Walk away now, Glen."

"Not a chance, Mr. Moen," Glen said. "That belongs to Frances, doesn't it? I noticed she wasn't wearing it the other day. Your doing, I'd wager."

Jonas's nostrils flared. "I noticed how brightly and how quickly your pale skin colored the other day. Also my doing."

Glowering, Glen squared his shoulders and lowered into a fighting crouch. Jonas snorted at him.

"Now, now," Leif barked, "if there's going to be trouble, take it the hell out of my shop."

"Is your sister still begging for an outing with me, Leif?" Glen asked, his voice syrupy and insincere, indigo eyes narrowing on Jonas. "I'd be willing to take her out, if you refuse to sell that piece to Mr. Moen here."

One of Leif's heavy brows lifted. "A chaperoned outing?"

"Of course." Glen rose out of his crouch, removed his hat, and touched it over his heart. "I'm a gentleman."

"Make it two outings," Leif said, "and a dance at the Braker's ball, and we have a deal."

Jonas spun on the pawnbroker. "Wouldn't you rather be a rich man? Here and now?"

"Sorry, Lord Moen," Leif said, not sounding sorry at all, "but I love my sister, and I've never much liked you."

“What would you need to sell me that piece instead?” Glen asked. Jonas imagined wringing his neck until his head popped right off.

“Marry her and the pearls are yours,” Leif said.

Glen scoffed. “Afraid that price is too rich for my blood. No offense to you and yours, but my family would never approve of a match with an untitled miss. Upsetting them isn’t quite worth goading the Bargainer here. I’ll take your assurance that you won’t be selling it to him as good enough, and I’ll call on your sister later today.”

“We’ve a deal then,” Leif said, and they shook on it.

“Send her my regards.” Glen placed his hat back on top of his winter blue hair, and he left the shop, chuckling smugly.

“Every man has a price,” Jonas growled at the pawnbroker.

“That’s right,” Leif said, “and mine’s my sister. So unless you’re going to marry her, fuck off.”

* * *

Frances,

Our mutual friend, Mr. Ramsey, has been safely ushered to the good doctor’s care. I’d like to return to Whiteholm tomorrow night, if that’s agreeable. I plan to stay for at least a fortnight, with the possibility of a few short forays into the city.

I await your response.

Jonas

Lord of Whiteholm,

As your new title suggests, the manor is now as much yours as it is mine. Communication of your schedule is appreciated, but I hope you don't think you have to seek my permission every time you wish to come home.

Before I forget, apparently you told our little Billie a story about Glasmorra being gifted a feast of frogs by the fairies. As lovely as your intentions were, I'm afraid she's now gotten caught twice sneaking frogs into Cook's soup pots. If you could mention to the girl that she need not consume the frogs herself, Mary and I would greatly appreciate it. As would Cook.

See you soon.

Frances

* * *

Jonas arrived at Whiteholm as the sun set. He spotted little Glasmorra out on the drive, stepping carefully across the gravel. Her feet were bare under her blue dress.

He ordered his carriage to pull over, and he climbed down. Cat hopped out after him.

"What are you doing here, Glas?" Jonas asked. He waved the driver on, and the horses set off toward the carriage house.

"I brought a message to the stable master," she said, concentrating hard and stepping carefully.

"Without any shoes?"

“Mr. Archer thought I’d remember to keep my shoes on my feet better if he sent me across the gravel instead of Carrot.”

Jonas frowned. “Would you like a ride?”

“Yes, please.” The toes peeking out under her dress were filthy.

He crouched before her, and she climbed onto his back, tiny hands gripping his shoulders. He hooked his arms under her legs, and they set off toward the main house together, Cat trailing them. “When we get inside, I’ll help you look for your shoes.”

“But they’re not in the house,” she said.

“You know where they are?” he asked. A small yellow butterfly took flight from between the rocks, and Cat bounded after it.

Glas pointed east. “I put them under the old bridge by the creek where I get all my frogs.”

He peered in that direction, slowing his pace. The trees were dense, full of shadows, and the paths were narrow. “Why’d you put them there?”

“Because they hurt my toes.” She wiggled her dirty feet at him. “So I thought the fairies might want to make houses out of them, but there aren’t any fairies in them yet.”

“Ah, they don’t fit anymore. Glas, you can just tell your cousins that you need new shoes, and they’ll stop making you wear those. They’ll get you something that fits you.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I’d rather not.”

He paused and canted his head to look at her. “Why not?”

Her dark lashes lowered, feathering across her freckled cheeks. “I used to live with my aunt. She gave me up because I cost too much.”

Jonas’s heart pinched. “I see.” He shifted her weight up higher on his back and resumed their path toward the house, crunching small stones

under his boots. “Your cousins aren’t going to give you up because you need new shoes, Glas.”

“But I want them to like me,” she said softly. “Grown people don’t like paying money for things.”

Her desire for affection was so very human it made him think of his wife and a much younger version of himself. “I’m certain they like you, but here’s what we’ll do. I’m going to buy you new boots in every size. I’ll send Mary to the village tonight, after the first set.”

“Every single size?”

“Every single one,” he repeated. “When they stop fitting, you can just slip into the next pair. If you ever need something else and you’re worried about asking your cousins, tell me or Lady Frances. We don’t worry about the costs of things in my house.”

Glasmorra pulled herself up higher, winding her slender arms around his neck. “Because you’re richer than the king?” She whispered it in his ear like it was a dark secret. “That’s what they say. But are you *really* richer than the King of Night?”

Jonas pondered the question for a moment, his head at a tilt. “I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know how much coin he’s got.”

Glasmorra squeezed his neck affectionately. “I think you *are*.”

With the awe in her voice, her arms around his neck, and her cheek pressed to his shoulder, Jonas felt richer than the king regardless.

* * *

It was an hour before sunrise when Jonas stormed into the drawing room, carrying a bundle of apples in his arms. Cat bounded after him, attacking his bootlaces. He'd wanted a quick snack before bed and had found a basket of apples in the kitchen, each of them with one tiny bite taken out of it before the apple had been put back, bite mark hidden.

There was only one tiny mouth at Whiteholm.

"There you are," Jonas said to little Glasmorra.

The black-haired fledgling was seated on a cushioned stool at the feet of Frances, holding yarn wrapped between her fingers to keep it untangled for her mistress. Frances knitted a rectangular lump of something he couldn't make out, lashes lifting briefly toward him in greeting, spectacles perched on her nose, a secret smile in the corner of her lovely mouth.

"What was wrong with this apple, Glas?" Jonas held up the first, the skin turning brown around the small teeth marks in the flesh of the fruit.

"Too sweet," the girl chirped.

He dropped the first on the floor and held up the next. "And this one?"

"Not sweet enough."

The next apple hit the rug with a thud. "And this one?"

"Too red."

He frowned at her. "Admittedly, apples are a better choice for consumption than frogs, but I think you should consider the possibility that you don't like the fruit. Then you can stop trying to eat them."

Glasmorra frowned. "I think I just haven't found the right one yet."

Frances's shoulders shook with silent mirth. Mary entered then, and Cat decided her laces were much more interesting than his.

"Cat," Jonas scolded, but the kitten didn't mind him. She never minded him.

“Cat,” Glasmorra called with the authority of a tiny nature goddess, and the feline stopped pawing at Mary’s boots and immediately trotted to the child’s side.

“It’s bedtime, Billie,” Mary said. “Oh, sorry. I mean, Glasmorra.” She studied the apples on the rug, puzzled, then she bent in half, plucking up the discarded fruit and sliding them into her apron. Jonas debated whether or not he should explain.

Glas scooped Cat into her arms and turned pleading eyes on Jonas. Eyes that had the power to turn his heart to mush. “Can she sleep in my room?”

Jonas held up the last of the apples. “Will you leave me at least *one* un-bitten apple next time?”

“I can do that,” Glas vowed, stroking Cat’s back.

“Then she may sleep in your room today.”

Mary ushered the girl out, Cat in tow, and pulled the sliding doors shut behind them. Jonas took a bite of the apple in his hand and made a face.

“Too red?” Frances teased.

“Definitely too red,” Jonas said, dropping the apple into the trash bin by the doors and forcing down the fruit in his mouth. It tasted like soap.

“Mary and I talked a lot about Billie this evening. We’re both worried about her.” She motioned for Jonas to sit down in the stool the child had occupied. He did so, but his legs were much longer, pushing his knees up near his chest. Frances had him hold his hands out. She strung blue yarn between his fingers to keep neat for her.

Jonas eyed the piece hanging off her long tools. “It’s an apron, isn’t it? You’re more than a century old, you knit for your humans, you care for

their children, and you worry after them all. Frances, you're not their employer. You're their grandmother."

Laughter burst from her lips. "I may be quite old by their standards, but I'm hardly their grandmother. If that's a judgement, I'd like to see you and your spoiled cat do it better."

"Tell me about Billie," he prompted.

Her needles clicked together as she knit while he slowly fed her more yarn. "Mary worries this isn't the place for the girl. She thinks a human child needs more sunlight. The Lunar schedule isn't ideal for a growing human. She struggles to sleep during the day."

He was familiar with her sleep struggles. He too had trouble sleeping in this house that still felt too large and too foreign. Glas would find him in his office some mornings, and he'd tell her fairy stories until her eyes were heavy. It put an ache in his chest to think of little Glasmorra sent away, but he pressed his mouth together and kept his opinions to himself.

Frances bit her lip, her expression troubled. "Her mother was an Archer, but she also has family up north near Reedholm. The Garners. The lord there is part Seelie, and they keep a diurnal schedule. Apparently, there are also more children about. It's a much larger estate with a lot of tenants. There are things a young girl needs to learn, so I suggested schooling."

Jonas had been thinking similarly. Why couldn't they fetch the girl a governess? Though, he wasn't certain how to fetch her friends to play with, but there were tenant farms nearby. Frances carried on before he could voice his thoughts.

"I thought of hiring a governess for the girl," she said, hazel eyes going glassy, "but Mary thinks a governess would teach her all the wrong

things. A common girl needs to learn different skills than a noble one. Mastering mathematics and other languages won't help her scrub pots, she says. But then I'd like to give her a good life. And I know she's happy here, even if she doesn't always get on with Cook."

Jonas wanted Glas to stay, but he was also quite certain he should never be the one making decisions for a child. He'd make a terrible parent, even if he had accidentally adopted a manor full of humans when he married his wife. He had no intention of parenting any of them the way Frances did, and they'd all be the better for it.

"She's charmed by you," Frances said. Jonas was about to comment that he was similarly fond of the child when his wife spoke over him once more. "She talks about you all the time, always wants to know what you're up to. Mary thinks we should let her at least visit her family in the north. I'm all right with that. I know she's young, but I'd feel better letting her go if I knew it was something she wanted. Perhaps she'll make a young friend there." She sighed and her shoulders drooped.

"Did you actually want me to comment on any of this," Jonas asked drolly, "or did you just need to hear yourself speak out loud about it?"

Frances sent him a warm smile. "Thank you. You've been grand." She leaned forward and brushed her lips lightly over his brow.

As the phantom of her tender kiss heated his skin, Jonas was certain of two things: The first was that he was completely and utterly in love with his wife. The second was that he needed to seduce her immediately, only he was now rather tangled in her yarn and wasn't feeling particularly appealing over it.

"If you pull," Frances warned, "it'll only make the knots cling tighter." Sniggering, she helped him around the worst tangles. "You seem stressed,

or was that just the effect of the yarn? How have you been, husband?”

Husband.

Hearing her say that did something to him. The bond made itself known, humming through his chest. His heart misbehaved. Then he thought of the infuriating encounter at the pawn shop, her bare neck that still didn't have her pearls back around it, and how his work in general had felt so dull lately, so unfulfilling.

“I've had a frustrating few days,” he confessed.

“Oh?”

He freed his fingers from the last of the knots, letting the blue yarn hang there between them like so many unsaid words. Their eyes met. “I can think of a few ways my wife could help me work through my frustration, were she so inclined . . .”

She grinned. “I can think of a few, too.”

Chapter 14



Frances

“**T**his is not what I had in mind,” Jonas grumbled, holding the knitting needles awkwardly.

“Don’t clench your fists. Hold the tools gently.” Frances ran her fingers across his knuckles, and his grip loosened. “You’re knitting the yarn, not trying to box with it. Now, try the loop I showed you—there you go, under, over, now pull it through onto the opposite needle. Not so hard, is it?”

“Hmm. Not so hard.” He squinted down at his work. Her weave was tight and well-practiced. His new attempts were a bit loose. “I’m ruining it.”

“You’re doing just fine,” she soothed. “You’re giving the apron a bit of character there, is all.”

A charming wrinkle formed between his brows. He worked for a time in silence. Frances held his yarn for him to keep it from knotting, offering gentle encouragement along the way. He looked boyish on the stool that was much too small for him.

“Huh,” he grunted. “This is surprisingly soothing.”

“Told you so, didn’t I,” she said, dropping from her chair to her knees, holding his yarn in one hand. She reached behind her while he was

distracted and tugged open the fastenings at the back of her dress. Then she removed her spectacles and set them on the chair.

“I think I accidentally double-looped that last one— Oh,” he exclaimed, as Frances loosened her corset next and pulled down the top of her dress, freeing her breasts from her light chemise. He attempted to set aside the yarn and needles, but she stopped him.

“I like it when you knit.” The corner of her mouth quirked.

“There’s absolutely no way I’m going to be able to—”

Frances pouted and started to pull her dress back up.

“All right, all right,” Jonas stammered, working the needles quickly into a frenzy of yarn.

Teasing him was so delicious. The twist of her lips felt wicked.

She pushed his knees farther apart, the outline of his stiff cock already prominent in his trousers. As she worked down the fall front, he sucked in a breath, blue yarn tangling about the tools, his attention focused entirely on her rather than the sizable mess he was creating.

Frances freed his cock and bent over it. Taking him in hand, she licked his length from tip to base until he was pulsing beneath her touch. She cupped his balls gently, running her thumb carefully across the delicate tissue. When she parted her lips around the thick head of his cock, he threw the knitting across the room and moaned.

At his exuberance, she laughed around his member, the vibrations of her mouth pulling new salacious sounds from him.

Jonas fisted his hands in her hair. “Sweet woman,” he begged, “I’ll give you every damn thing your heart desires if you never ever stop. *Gods*, yes, just like that!”

The desperation in his voice had heat pooling between her thighs. She kissed the tip and repeated the motion, running her lips over his length slow, then fast. Deep, then shallow, testing the waters.

Margot had instructed her not to worry about mess or about being delicate. Enthusiasm mattered most, the courtesan had said. Frances peeked up at him through her lashes and saw the rapture in her husband's face, and her enthusiasm abounded.

His hips jerked forward. He fondled one of her breasts, squeezing it softly, rolling the pert nipple between the pads of his fingers.

When his cock was thoroughly wet, she sucked long and hard and released him from her mouth with a pop. Jonas watched her, pupils dilated, eyes glazed over. She shifted in closer on her knees. Lifting her chest, she fitted his length between her breasts and pressed the soft pillows together, enclosing him.

"Sacred fucking stars," he panted as she began to move, rising and falling, his satiny skin slick and hot. His head fell back, and he moaned at the ceiling.

When his hips bucked up, she licked the tip of his cock that jutted from between her breasts, and his body visibly tremored.

"Frances, if we don't stop now, I'm going to spend right in your beautiful face." His hands dropped to his sides, fingers digging into the edges of the small stool.

"Then spend," she dared him.

Moving with him, she picked up speed, and just as he'd warned, wet heat hit her chin and laced up her cheek. He grunted his pleasure, his face scrunching up in concentration.

A sheen of sweat covered his brow under the fall of his mahogany hair. At his sides, his arms trembled. He was a man completely undone.

Frances smiled smugly.

Jonas moved like his limbs were full of lead, refastening his trousers. He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and gently cleaned her face.

Frances took her time re-dressing with his help, the bond thrumming warmly in her chest, her broken soul responding with a dull ache that had her biting her lip, feeling uncertain.

“What’s wrong, sweet wife?” he asked her, his voice thick and sleepy.

Frances leaned forward, resting her cheek on his lap. The sharp prickle of the broken parts of her made her breath catch. It was getting worse, she thought; the pain in her soul was growing sharper, digging deeper. Jonas ran tender fingers through her hair, pushing strands behind the point of her ear. They remained there for a time, soaking up the quiet, the bond thrumming through them while they shared deep breaths.

Finally, Frances spoke, her voice barely more than a whisper. “You stopped hiring courtesans at The Gilded Boot. Do you go somewhere else now instead?”

The silence that fell between them was absolute. His touch stalled for a second, then he resumed running the pads of his fingers across her hair. She already knew the answer, but the question had spilled out of her compulsively.

“I don’t go anywhere else,” he said, a catch in his voice.

She blinked rapidly, shifting her head against his thigh. “No courtesans at all?”

“No courtesans,” he said quietly.

“No mistresses?”

“None.”

“Why?” She hadn’t spoken the word loudly, but it felt loud leaving her lips. It hung there between them, growing pregnant.

His fingers faltered. He laid his palm over her cheek, tension coiling through him and through the bond.

Frances sat up. She peered briefly into his eyes. “I shouldn’t have asked that. It’s not my business, and I don’t need to know.”

Carefully, she climbed to her feet. Her knees under her skirts smarted with friction burns.

He took her hand in his and held it firmly, halting her, but his lashes lowered. His lips moved like he wanted to speak, but he failed to produce a sound. Slowly, he released her.

She dropped a kiss on his crown between his horns. Her lips lingered there. Frances breathed in the scent of his hair, almond soap and spicy sweat.

She left him sitting on the little stool in an exhausted heap.

* * *

Frances retired to her room. With the help of her lady’s maid, she stripped off her dress, unlaced the rest of her corset, and unpinned her hair. She changed into a silk night rail. Just after her girl left the room, there was a knock at the door. A tentative knock.

She didn’t need the bond to tell her Jonas was on the other side.

“Come in,” she called, turning on her stool at the vanity to face him.

He entered, letting the door swing open at his back. His waistcoat was undone, the top of his collar unbuttoned. His gaze dragged over her, pebbling her skin. He stood stiffly, his lips moving soundlessly, like his voice had been captured.

On the vanity was a box of knitting, things the bond demanded she make with her own two hands for her mate, gifts that made her soul ache. She'd never delivered them—the discomfort in the broken parts of her had been too much to overcome.

Scarves and assorted presents overflowed from the top of the box. Her eyes flickered toward them nervously. She ran a hand down her arm, hoping he wouldn't notice them there—then also hoping he would see them. Her broken soul was like a shawl with dropped stitches she could never mend, not without unraveling completely. The bond and the torn parts of her played yet another painful game of tug-of-war.

“Please help me with my cufflinks,” he said finally, offering up his wrists.

The tension building in her back eased. She waved him over.

He stood before her, arms outstretched, looking pointedly everywhere else in the room but at her.

“You should let me promote someone to valet,” she said, working the cufflinks loose. The bond warmed in her chest.

“I like it when you do it,” he confessed. His hair was back over his brow, falling into his eyes. “I like it when you let me unpin your hair, too. Forget a valet. Maybe you should move your lady's maid to a new position and allow me to dress and undress you.”

She removed the cufflinks, little star-shaped pieces of brass, then she held them out to him in her palm, but he didn't take them. “Jonas?” she

prompted.

He was uncharacteristically quiet again.

“I used to worry about being denied things,” he said finally, his brown eyes taking on a faraway look. “One denial would beget another and then another, and before I’d realize it, I’d be back on the streets again with nothing. But I don’t worry about that anymore, and it’s not because I’m wealthier than the king himself, as they say. It’s because a new worry has captured me.”

Frances licked her lips, her pulse pumping in her neck and thighs. She worked her throat. “Now what do you worry about?”

“Now all I worry about is *you* being denied things, Frances.” His fingers flexed at his sides like he didn’t know what to do with them.

Her heart pounded hard against the cage of her ribs. Butterflies took flight in her belly. Somehow her body was suddenly hot and cold all at the same time, and he was standing much too close to that box of knitting. The bond surged alongside her pulse. “I don’t understand. You said you didn’t want—”

“I want to throw our marriage agreement into the fire. No more business partners.” He swallowed hard. “And then I want to love you.”

Frances didn’t have words. Only feelings. Too many of them. There was a truth she wanted not to confess even to herself: she felt entirely unworthy of this man. Yes, even this trickster, even the wicked Bargainer himself, a man who truly wasn’t so wicked at all. He was wonderful. Jonas was good. A man with multitudes, a man with heart.

She was half-fae and a broken one at that, and not even her title or her past years of upstanding behavior could pardon her for what she now lacked. She couldn’t give her mate what he needed, what all fae coveted

when they found a match. It had been so much easier to claim she didn't want love or romance or a true mate.

But of course she did. Those things were just barred from her now, and she did her best not to covet something she had no power to gain. The unrest and unpredictability of a blooming bond was all she could offer him now.

Her soul ached and her heart throbbed, and their connection burned in her chest. The truth of her longing spread through her like poison. Tears stung her eyes and spilled over. She grabbed the end of a scarf out of the box of knitting and pressed it to her damp face.

She yanked too hard, pulling the box over, spilling the contents onto the floor. Jonas lowered to his knees beside it and began scooping things up.

Frances sobbed the moment he touched them.

He froze, hands poised in the air. "What did I do wrong?"

"The knitting." She dropped beside him on the floor in a pool of silk and limbs. "I-I . . . the bond . . ." Her chin trembled. "It wanted me to make you things."

Jonas sat there dumbfounded. "Like a bonding ritual? Like feeding each other or the way I feel about undressing you and helping you get ready for bed?"

"Yes," she cried, "but it *hurt* giving them to you, so I just knitted them quickly while you were away to make the instincts quiet, and then I stuffed them into that box." Her lungs hitched. "And now you're *touching* them!"

His gaze bounced between her, the scarves, and the box, frozen in place with uncertainty.

She wiped her cheeks and peered at him, her vision watery. “Do . . . do you like them?” Her voice broke.

Jonas hesitated, his brow furrowing in confusion. “Um?”

Frances wailed.

“Er, I love them!” he shouted, throwing the scarves around his neck, pulling more of them out of the overturned box and draping them over his shoulders and arms. “These are the best godsdamned scarves I’ve ever laid eyes on!”

Frances hid her face in her hands. “You’re just saying that so I’ll stop crying.”

“No, no. I love them, *and* I want you to stop crying. It can be both things!” he insisted, pulling another creation out of the box and laying it over the base of his horns.

She rubbed under her nose and hiccupped, fighting to pull herself back together. “Why do you have a potholder on your head?”

“It’s a potholder?” He plucked the bulky square off his hair, holding it between his fingers. “I think a better question is why did you make me a potholder?”

“I don’t know!” Another sob wracked her. She fell back in a heap, tears streaming her face. Her throat burned.

“A potholder that I will cherish *always!*” Jonas followed her down, looking ridiculous mummified in scarves. He hovered over her. “Frances, please. Please stop crying. Your sadness is like needles under my skin.”

She couldn’t stop, not fully. He was so absurd decorated in her gifts, she wanted to laugh and sob at the same time, but the knot growing in her throat made sounds impossible. Her heart hurt, and the bond wouldn’t be

still. It was incessant, and it was cinching around her ribs, turning the air thin.

“Is it always like this for you?” Worry pitched his voice higher.

“It’s getting worse. I think I’m losing my mind,” she confessed, forcing air through her aching lungs.

“Is it better when I’m away?” He used the end of one of the scarves to mop up the sides of her face.

“Sometimes.” She rolled onto her side, pulling away from his touch, hugging her knees to her chest. “Sometimes I just need a break from all of it.”

He reached for her, then seemed to think better of it, crossing his arms over his chest instead. “We’ll figure this out, Frances. I promise you.”

Chapter 15



Jonas

Jonas couldn't sleep that day. An hour before dusk, as the house was beginning to awake, he dressed, told the footman Carrot to have his carriage readied, and then went to collect his cat. Glas had taken the feline outside early. He found them together on the front lawn. The girl was wearing one of the new pairs of boots he'd had delivered for her.

When his carriage was ready, he bid the child farewell for now and returned to the city. He made a quick stop at The Gilded Boot, purchasing several bottles of ale. Then he decided he didn't want to return to his old brownstone, but he couldn't go back to Whiteholm either and risk stealing the last of his poor bride's sanity.

By the time he made up his mind and arrived at his offices, his workers were already gone. He set up camp in the meeting room on the first floor.

Just him, his cat, several tall bottles of ale for company, and the knitted potholder his mate had made for him, which he'd impulsively jammed into his pocket. He ran his fingers over the top of it. Jonas laid his head down on the meeting room table, soaking up the cool surface of the wood through his cheek. His eyes stung from a lack of sleep.

He heard movement in the hall outside. It occurred to him that it was probably an intruder since no one had any cause to be there at that hour,

but he still didn't have it in him to pick his head up. Not even when the intruder opened the door to the meeting room.

"If you're here to kill me, make it quick," Jonas groaned. "If you're just here to rob me, take what you want and leave already—just don't touch my cat. Touch my cat, and I'll fucking kill you."

"Margot was right," Susan said with a deep sigh.

Finally, Jonas lifted his head, surprised to find his friend there.

Dressed in one of her glamorous gowns, she crossed to him and dropped into the chair at his side. "You look dreadful, which means I've lost the bet."

"What bet?" he grumbled. He grabbed one of the ale bottles and picked at the wax seal on the front with his thumbnail, ruining the image of the mountain peak stamped on its center.

Susan crossed one leg over the other under her bountiful skirts. "When you stopped by earlier, bought up several bottles of Unseelie ale, then stormed off, Margot wagered that you weren't well and that you needed a friend. I bet you were fine and just needed some time to yourself."

"Sorry about your luck," he said, scraping off another section of the seal, creating a small pile of shredded wax at the base of the bottle. "How'd you get in here?"

"You didn't even lock the doors, you sad sap. I walked right in. You owe me a half-piece, by the way," she teased. Susan grabbed one of the bottles off the table. She popped the seal and sniffed it. "Are you going to tell me why you're drinking yourself into a stupor, or should I start guessing? In my line of work, it's only ever one of two things."

Jonas grunted at her noncommittally.

"Romance or money. Or both, I suppose," she corrected herself.

“I’m not in a stupor,” he said sourly. “I haven’t even started drinking yet.”

“Gods,” Susan said sympathetically. “You’ve got it bad, then. So it’s definitely romance. Nothing makes a man act like a moaning drunk more than a broken heart.”

When the wax was gone, he dug his nail at a crack in the table’s finish. “Frances can’t love me.” The words felt so melodramatic leaving his lips, but the truth of them was like a hammer to his chest. He sunk farther into his seat.

Susan kicked up her feet on the opposite chair, resting the bottom of the bottle against her middle. “Are we talking about your wife or some other poor Frances who you’ve got your sights set on? If it’s your wife, she definitely can love you. She probably shouldn’t,” she said playfully, “but that’s a different discussion.”

He sighed. “When she tries to bond with me, it makes her lose her sanity. It hurts her soul, and she panics. She can’t breathe.”

“She came to Margot for lessons on how to please you in bed. That’s not the behavior of a woman who can’t love you.”

“So *that’s* where she learned it,” Jonas said, thinking of her seduction in the drawing room, the ghost of a smile curving his lips. Then with a long exhale he drooped over the table. “You should have seen her earlier, though. She was beside herself. Crying and carrying on about potholders. Just being near me did that to her. And it’s not the first time. She’s swooned before when it got bad.”

“Potholders?”

He shook his head. “Don’t ask.”

Susan tipped back her bottle and took a contemplative swallow. She grimaced. "This is terrible. We need another brewer."

He glared at her out of the corner of his eye. "You said these were your best bottles."

"I said they were my most *expensive* bottles. You inferred they were the best. That's on you." Her nose wrinkled, and she set the ale aside. "Definitely not my best unless you like the aftertaste of old socks. It'll still get you drunk, if that's what you want. I think we both know that's not actually what you need, though."

"I need my wife," he groaned.

"Frances is a witch, isn't she? The little dragon is a bit of a giveaway, eh? Not too many people walking about with familiars or reputations like 'wanton witch' and all that, either."

Jonas rubbed at his sore eyes with the palms of his hands. "Yes. What of it?"

"Well, I know a thing or two about witches. I won't claim to be an expert, but I know things."

"The Bloody Queen of Night," Jonas remembered, sitting up straighter.

"That's the one. Bonding is hard on them. Don't ask me why. I don't understand bargain magic or fae instincts, and I can't fathom breaking off a piece of my soul and literally handing it to another, but what I do understand is that it does some damage that makes mating difficult." She smiled knowingly. "Difficult but not impossible."

Jonas stopped digging his thumb into the tabletop, realization dawning. "Did the queen have similar troubles with her mate?"

"With her *true* mate," she said with a wink and another warm smile. "Not that I have any idea what that actually means, other than it's

apparently a preferable state to your kind, and I hear it's permanent. I can attest that the queen is disgustingly happy with her man, even when they aren't lopping off the hands of thieves for fun."

Jonas was not in the habit of allowing himself to get his hopes up, but at that moment his hopes were soaring so high they were impossible to tamp down. "How'd the queen overcome the mating difficulties?"

"Easy." Susan shrugged. "She fell in love with the king. Had no trouble after that, she said."

"Fell in love," he repeated slowly, gaze drifting back to the ale bottle with the peeled wax seal, staring straight through it, his mind plummeting to more frightening places.

He had no idea how to make her do that. He couldn't even get his own parents to love him properly. What chance did he really stand here? He was a trickster, a master of manipulation, all things she had nothing but disdain for. Up until this point, he'd been certain that instinct and the fae magic of their bond was what made their relationship work, what made them decent partners. But love?

"Tell me everything," he said sternly. Slim chances or not, he'd try. "Every detail that you know. Speak plainly."

She squinted at him. "About how she fell in love?"

"Yes! I need to know everything he did for her and exactly how he did it."

* * *

Frances,

If you are not yet ready to burn our original marriage agreement, please consider this addendum:

Lord Jonas Moen, from this point further known as the “Husband,” shall grant to Lady Frances Moen, from this point further known as the “Wife,” whatever her heart wants. When the Wife declares her wishes, it shall be the Husband’s duty to make every effort to acquire the object of her desire in a most timely fashion. The definition of timeliness will be at the discretion of the Wife.

With all my heart,

Jonas

Husband,

Who are you? And what have you done with my antagonistic mate?

Concerned,

The Wife

** * **

Two days later, Jonas arrived at his offices bright and early in the morning, just as his secretary was settling in at his desk on the first floor. Jonas’s sleep routine was completely shot from working tirelessly to complete tasks certain to win him the heart of his bride. He protected his eyes from the sun beneath the wide brim of a felt hat modified to fit around his

horns, and he stayed awake at odd hours, fueled by a tenacity that usually empowered his bargains.

Cat trotted ahead of him to inspect Fergus.

“Who’s a good kitty?” Fergus purred, bending down to pet her. She allowed his affection with mild disinterest. “She’s getting so big.”

Cat hissed at that, and Fergus yanked his hand away, chuckling nervously.

“Women don’t like to be told they’re getting big, Fergus,” Jonas drawled, and Fergus’s silver brows drew together in confusion. “Why they wouldn’t want such a compliment, I don’t know. I’m as baffled as you are.”

The front doors opened.

Jonas turned to greet the guest he’d been expecting. “Dr. Bandile, did you have any luck?”

The good doctor removed his top hat from his head sheepishly. “My efforts were in vain, Lord Moen,” he admitted, shuffling the brim of his hat between his fingers as Jonas drew closer. “The pawnbroker—Leif I think his name was—he knew immediately what I was about. I shopped around exactly like your letter suggested, chose a couple of items, then requested the string of pearls with Frances’s memory charm to round out my purchases. I even took my time and pretended to doubt that I wanted them. He didn’t bite.”

“Apparently Leif is sharper than I gave him credit for.” Jonas sighed. He’d tried yesterday to send the floral delivery workers to the shop to purchase Frances’s necklace, but the Unseelie fae brothers lacked finesse, and the pawnbroker saw through them immediately. He had high hopes the sophisticated doctor could succeed where the workers had failed.

“Leif claimed no one paid the pearls a glance for months because they’re engraved, and now suddenly everyone wants them. He said to tell you he wouldn’t be fooled so easily, then he said something about how the offer to marry his sister is still on the table.”

Jonas rolled his eyes. “I appreciate you taking time to try, either way. Frances would love to have you at Whiteholm when you’re free.”

“And I would love to visit with her. I’ve been meaning to, but things are busier than normal at the dispensary without her help.” The doctor fished in his pockets, removed four gold crescents, and handed them off to Jonas. “There’s the coin I was unable to spend. I appreciate that you thought to include me in your efforts to see that charm returned to its rightful owner. It’s always been precious to her. Best of luck to you, Lord Moen.” Dr. Bandile tipped his hat in farewell and shuffled off.

Jonas waited until the door shut out the good doctor before he swore loudly and colorfully.

If tricks wouldn’t help, he was going to need to rely on something else. Something far more grueling . . .

* * *

Frances,

For your consideration, an additional addendum:

The Husband shall remain entirely faithful to the Wife at all times because there is no one more deserving of the pleasure and intimacy that his body can offer. Every effort will be made by the

*Husband to fulfill the Wife's need for touch, affection, pleasure,
and privacy when requested.*

With all my body,

Jonas

Jonas,

*I hope I didn't chase you off the other night when I was unwell.
This is still your home, you know. If you have work to attend to,
then I completely understand. But please don't stay away from us
too long.*

Frances

* * *

Jonas napped briefly in the carriage on the way to Main Street. He awoke with a start as it came to an abrupt halt. Protecting his eyes, he replaced his felt hat on top of his head, and then he slipped out onto the walkway under a warm afternoon sun.

The streets leading to the club, The Diamond Scar, were packed with foot traffic, but the alley nearby was practically deserted aside from a few workers—human men he easily bribed to look the other way using a handful of copper crescents. He slipped into the side door of the club without a fuss.

The air was thick inside, a mixture of expensive cigar smoke, alcohol, and spices clouding a lofty space Jonas found uninspiring. The bar was long and elaborate, the seating capacious, allowing for private

conversations. On the floor above were rows of tables for illegal gambling, visible through the balcony railings. He spotted card games like Fortuity. His keen hearing picked up the clatter of dice hitting wood.

Jonas ignored an overly curious greeting from the bartender, moving through the modest crowd of gentry to reach the back table where Lord Thorvald nursed a thick cigar, lounging in the padded banquette seating.

“Moen?” Thorvald coughed. On the table before the heavy businessman sat a plate of what remained of the lord’s lunch, a cloth napkin wadded on it, and a tall glass half-full of ale.

Jonas slid in across from him, wrinkling his nose when the lord blew a cloud of smoke in his face.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t realize you’d been added as a member,” Thorvald said, his fleshy cheeks coloring from peach to puce. “This club is going to the dogs.”

“I haven’t been added,” Jonas admitted, glancing around the room, checking for spying eyes. The bartender was still staring at him. “The dinner party for new applicants is a month away.”

“If it’s a trade you’re after, I meant what I said before,” Thorvald said gruffly, his bushy mustache bristling. “The sale is dead.”

His open hostility brought out Jonas’s sarcastic smile. “And yet I’ve still got your workers.”

Thorvald aggressively flicked ash from the end of his cigar into the glass tray on the table. “Progress is slow, but the lines are being laid in spite of your interference.”

Something sticky caught on the sole of Jonas’s boot. He scooted his foot aside, annoyed. “What if I told you I was no longer interested in railyards or metal workers?”

Thorvald squinted at him. “If that were true, I’d say you had my attention.”

“You own a few small properties on Dimmet Street. One of which includes a modest pawnshop that you rent out.”

Lord Thorvald pushed his ale toward Jonas, a gesture of goodwill Jonas had no interest in accepting, but he did anyway. Resisting the urge to grimace, he took the glass in hand and peered inside at the amber liquid.

“The shop that used to be yours,” Thorvald guessed.

Jonas drank reluctantly. The ale wasn’t bad, but the cup reeked of stale tobacco. “Let’s say I’m feeling sentimental.” Pushing the glass back toward its owner, Jonas wiped his lips on his sleeve.

“How sentimental?” Thorvald asked, stuffing his cigar into the corner of his mouth.

“So sentimental I’m willing to release your workers and offer you asking price on the shop, as long as you don’t linger over the sale too long. I want it done, and I want it done quickly. No more meetings or offers and counter-offers. No more nonsense. Just business.”

Thorvald took a long drag, blowing white smoke out of his bulbous nostrils. “That’s very sentimental indeed, the Bargainer offering me a *fair* trade. Sounds almost too good to be true. You won’t blame me if I doubt it.”

“Of course not. You aren’t a fool. I’ll send the papers over tonight, give you a day to read them over, then I want an answer promptly. Just the one day, Thorvald. That’s all the time you get before my sentiment runs out.”

Thorvald extended his hand across the table. Jonas glanced down at the meaty limb. They shook on it.

* * *

Frances,

Another addendum for your consideration:

From this point forth, the Husband shall never wear any other scarves, hats, sweaters, potholders, or other knitted garments, aside from those crafted for him by the talented hands of the Wife. No other knit clothing items are more befitting the Lord of Whiteholm than those made by his lady.

With all my soul,

Jonas

Chapter 16



Dear Husband,

Per your first addendum, you are obligated to present to the Wife the object of her desire in a most timely fashion.

You are what I most desire. Please present yourself as expeditiously as you are able.

Frances

* * *

Frances

Dusk approached swiftly. Beyond the paned windows at Whiteholm, the sky had lightened from butter yellow to a dusky purple. Frances was on her way to the drawing room to meet with Mary. They needed to discuss her appointment as the housekeeper and the duties that would entail, but after a quick sweep of the room, she found it empty.

Odd. Mary was so punctual and dependable. So much so, in fact, that Frances was certain something most urgent had taken precedence. She returned to the hall to look for her and to assist with whatever that might be.

Carrot found Frances in the corridor first. “My lady,” he called. He held a periodical in his hand, a folded slip of print paper. She could see enough of the title—The Illustrated River Chronicle—to recognize the gossip sheet for what it was.

Frances greeted him with a smile. Taking in his anxious expression, her smile faded. “Is something wrong?”

Carrot shuffled his feet and wrinkled the periodical. “A messenger arrived.”

“From Jonas? I’ll have it—”

“Um, no, my lady. The messenger delivered this from the city.” He raised the scandal sheet.

Her brow furrowed. “Who would pay to have that drivel brought all the way out here?”

“Lord Freest, my lady,” Carrot said, scowling down at the paper. “The messenger didn’t want to say at first who employed him, but Branson and I got stern with him and eventually he sang. I didn’t bring it to you right away,” he confessed. “Perhaps I should have.”

“I see . . .” Frances chewed on her cheek. He opened the periodical, and she caught the heading.

Wanton Witch Weds . . . Unease churned in her gut.

Carrot hung his head and rubbed the back of his neck. Frances felt a rush of warmth for the boy—er, adult. She remembered a much younger Braydon who used to stand that same way after he’d been caught swimming again when he was supposed to be helping his father with work. “I wasn’t sure if I should just toss it, but . . .”

“You did the right thing, Carrot,” she said gently, taking it from him. Frances read the title once more, then she folded it back up. “But you

know what? Lord Freest can't hurt me if I just never read it. Can he?"

He smiled impishly. "That's what I thought, but then I didn't want you to learn of it in some other way either."

She handed it back to him. "You were right to tell me so that I could make that wise choice myself. To hell with the gossips," she added, thinking of her husband. "Would you dispose of it for me?"

"Gladly, my lady. Oh?" Shifting his weight, Carrot had stepped on something. He lifted his foot, revealing a now mushed raspberry tartlet. "How did that get there?"

"I'm not sure." Frances peered down the corridor but couldn't perceive the cause. The kitchens were on the other side of the main house.

"One of my favorites, too," Carrot muttered.

"You're not going to eat that, are you?" She eyed him reproachfully.

"Well, not now that you've caught me, my lady," he said, the corner of his mouth curving mischievously. "I'll see that this rubbish gossip paper lands in a fireplace." He rumped the periodical, then he picked up the sections of crushed tartlet from the floor and headed off back down the hall.

"You're going to throw that pastry in the bin, right?" she called after him.

His laughter echoed back to her.

Frances resumed her search for Mary, heading in the direction of the conservatory. She made it a few yards before another tartlet caught her eye, placed in the center of the floor. It was fresh. It still steamed a little.

"What in the blazing stars?" She bent to examine it more closely, and then realization dawned. *Iso*.

Iso did not respond to her summons. Frances sensed her close by in the hoard she'd made her. On the way to the conservatory, she spotted a dozen more tartlets laid out in a neat row, all leading toward the hoard, a tempting trail indeed for at least two of her more handsome servants.

Frances stomped through the doors and jerked to a halt. The flowers and shrubs had doubled in size since she'd visited it last, and it wasn't the only thing that had grown larger. Brimstone burned in her nostrils. The space itself seemed bigger somehow. Vines wound up the glass walls. A knot of toads scurried across the earthen floor, diving for cover in the water gardens.

"Iso?"

Iso glided from one corner of the room to the clay fountain with the cherub child holding a pitcher. She landed on the pitcher and cawed at her mistress like a disgruntled bird.

"Iso!" Frances said sternly. "Are you attempting to lure the Archer brothers into your hoard?"

The dragon tucked her leathery wings in around herself. *Maybe.*

Frances glared at her. "I told you, you can't do that. You can't trap men in here."

I'm not going to hurt them. And I could let them out, I suppose, when you needed them again for their work. I'll just have to devise a way to trick them back in afterward.

Frances shook her head. "I mean it, Iso. No tricking the staff in here."

Oh, all right, she huffed. *I won't trick the staff in here.*

"Good." Frances looked around, dumbstruck. "Iso, it's so vibrant in here. And larger. Is it actually bigger, too?"

Yes, the dragon purred proudly. She left the fountain and landed on Frances's shoulder.

Frances carried her out of the conservatory, back down the hall. She hadn't forgotten that she still needed to find Mary. "But how did you do all that?"

Blood magic. I've imbued it with my essence. The more time I spend in there, the more I feed it little by little as my lifeforce is replenished.

"Then is it like a real dragon hoard now?"

The clouds darkened, and an unexpected storm rolled in. Fat droplets pelted the windows as they walked. The setting sun turned the storm purple and violet.

I didn't know that was possible, but yes, Iso said. Or it will be when I'm finished with it.

"That's wonderful, Iso—as long as you don't imprison my staff in there." Frances wagged a stern finger at her familiar.

But before Iso could respond, there was a commotion down the hall. Frances lifted her skirts over the tops of her boots and hurried to the foyer to investigate.

The doors were blown open. Mr. Archer fought to close them against the wet gale. Mary stood there, rain-soaked, mud-splattered, weeping, and dripping a puddle onto the marble.

"Billie," Mary panted.

Frances's heart squeezed in her chest. "What's happened?"

Mary turned to her, stifling a sob. She worked her throat. "Branson accidentally let it slip that we have a visit planned for Billie with her family up north. She was upset, convinced we were trying to get rid of her. She demanded to speak to Lord Moen, certain he wouldn't make her go."

Frances crossed to her, placing a soothing hand on her arm. “Where is she now?”

“Branson didn’t like that she was shouting at me. He got cross with her,” Mary choked. “He told her Lord Moen doesn’t even like humans. Billie ran.”

Rain and wind howled outside. “In all this?” Frances said, and a crack of thunder boomed overhead.

“Yes,” Mary sobbed. “We tried to follow her, but she disappeared in the trees in the east there. Then the storm surprised us, and it’s getting too dark to see! I called for her until my throat was raw, and now I’m so worried! She could be hurt! She could be lost!”

“I’m going to look for her,” Frances said, and Mr. Archer yanked the doors back open. “Fetch lanterns and get the others to join the search!” she shouted to the butler over the wail of the wind.

Iso launched from her shoulder, gliding into the downpour. *I’ll find her.* Beating her wings, she rose higher.

Rain bit at Frances’s face as she jogged across slick lawn, then over the gravel drive. *Mary said she ran this way. To the east.*

Iso turned in the air, sailing farther east. She reached the forest first, flying over the tops of the trees.

The storm came down so furiously, Frances’s skirts were heavy and soaked in minutes. Without a care for modesty, she bunched them up around her waist and sprinted. She used every bit of her fae strength to keep her legs pumping, carrying her through the tree line to the narrow paths that led off toward neighboring farms.

“Billie?” Frances shouted, the storm swallowing up the word. The woods grew thicker. She had to slow her pace to push through brambles,

her keen eyes searching the grounds for little footprints in the growing dark.

Her heart fractured thinking about all the terrible things that could befall such a small, vulnerable human in all this. And in that fracture, the bond vibrated in her chest and pulsed through her blood, and the broken bits of her soul sharpened. Within her, Frances cried out for her mate, desperate for the comfort only the match to her damaged soul could provide.

“Billie!” she screamed. “Billie, please say something!” *Iso, do you see anything?*

No. I don’t— Wait! The bridge. This way, Frances, hurry!

Frances ducked under a dangling broken branch, then stepped into the path of a swinging limb caught in the wind. It struck her arm and face hard enough it’d leave a mark for sure, but she kept moving. She was so panicked, she hardly felt it.

“Billie!” she shouted. The narrow path opened into a clearing cut by a small creek.

The bridge had broken. The railing had fallen. Iso flew into view, alighting on a rickety post. *She’s here!*

Frances let out a cry of relief. Her heart thundered in her breast. Eyes scanning the silt bank, she spotted the child. Billie had fallen. She lay sprawled on her back, an arm in waters that were rapidly rising and moving quickly, propelled by rain and wind.

Frances’s boots sunk into mud and silt up to her ankles. Icy wet soaked through the leather. “Billie!” she called.

She’s alive. I feel her lifeforce, Iso said.

But the child was unresponsive. Frances trudged through muck to reach her. Rain pelted the girl's face, and she didn't stir. Bending low, Frances pressed her ear to Billie's chest. She could barely hear over the storm, but her heartbeat was there. Her chest rose and fell, her breaths slow and heavy.

Frances checked her for injuries, pushing back her dark hair.

Blood.

Too much of it was soaking through the strands near her temple and coming out of her ear. Billie had struck her head on the way down when the bridge had given out. Frances ripped off the sleeve of her dress, pressing the satin to the child's wound.

I need you, Iso! Frances said. Iso glided down, landing beside Billie's face. She replaced Frances's hand, using her weight to keep the makeshift bandage hugging the child's face in place. Billie's lashes fluttered.

Frances whispered a frantic prayer, first to her mother, then the divines, begging for healing and protection. She lifted the girl's skirts to check her legs for further injuries before she dared move her. Her right knee was swollen and dislocated.

Frances laid a hand over the rounded joint. Billie stirred at her touch. While pushing the cap of her knee to its correct position, Frances pulled her leg straight and felt the small bone pop back into place.

Billie moaned. Her eyes opened briefly and then shut again. Her body went limp.

"Billie, I've got you!" Frances said, but the girl was out again, head back, eyes shut. Frances stood and reached up toward the broken bridge. She ripped two long boards off the fallen railing. Ignoring the splinters that bit into her fingers, she used the boards to brace the child's damaged

knee. Frances tore off her other sleeve and ripped the seam down the side of her dress. She used strips of satin to tie the boards to Billie's leg, one above and the other below the joint, keeping it immobile.

Her head is still bleeding, Iso said, concern flavoring her words.

Sit on her chest. Keep pressure on that wound, Frances instructed, and Iso did as she was bid, squatting under the child's chin, laying her claws over the bandage, her wings tucked against her sides.

Frances scooped the girl up, lifting her into her arms. The boards did their job, keeping the leg straight and the joint immobile, but Billie's skin was frighteningly cold. Frances could feel the heat fleeing her little body, even through the layers of her dress.

Trudging up the bank and back into the thick woods, she let out a litany of curses. The canopy overhead shielded them from the worst of the storm, but Frances had to move more slowly, had to keep that leg straight.

And Gods, the child was cold, and anxious thoughts of what could have happened seized Frances's heart and wrang it out. What if Billie had fallen into the water? What if the creek had risen before they ever got to her?

What if her head injury was something she couldn't recover from?

A prickling sensation started in Frances's eyes and nose. Her throat burned, but she held back her distress. The bond had other plans, however, calling once more for her mate, reverberating through her, burning in her chest until she couldn't feel the cold rain anymore.

When they broke through the tree line, the rain had slowed. Lightning jumped silently from cloud to cloud, the claps of thunder distant rumbles. Her staff lined the grounds, hefting lanterns.

Branson spotted them first. He charged toward them in his soaked footman's uniform. "Billie! Oh gods, Billie, I'm so sorry!" His lips

trembled in the wet wind.

“We need a doctor!”

“I’ll send father to fetch Dr. Bandile. He’s the strongest rider.” Branson lifted the lantern high, scanning the row of servants down the tree line.

“Good,” Frances said. The butler, Mr. Archer, was indeed the strongest rider. “Get the doors for me, then tell your father.”

Branson ran for the doors and threw them open. He followed at Frances’s heels, through the foyer and up the stairs. The master bedroom had the freshest bedding, so she took Billie there. Branson opened that door for her too, while she fired off several more instructions, then he rushed to complete the tasks.

There was silence, only Billie’s light breathing, as Frances laid her in bed. Frances ripped the child’s dress straight down the side seam, then she peeled it from her wet body and wrapped her gently in the warm dry bedding.

Tell me good news, Iso, Frances pleaded.

The dragon adjusted from sitting on the child’s chest to resting on the pillows, holding the makeshift bandage to her injury. *The child is still bleeding.*

Suddenly, Frances’s muscles screamed at her. Her body was unaccustomed to so much sprinting and lifting. The adrenaline was waning, and now she could feel the cold wet satin clinging to her body, could feel the many splinters biting into her fingers. A dull pain shot from her lower back down her leg. Her arm and the side of her face smarted where she’d been struck by the stray limb.

She ignored all of it.

The house awoke as her servants filtered back inside, then into the master bedroom around her. The fire was built high. Clean bandages and hot water were fetched. Stitching supplies and proper bandages were delivered.

Frances cleaned the head wound, then pinched it shut, contemplating a suture. The blood coming from Billie's ear had stopped. It caked around the lobe. Frances checked Billie's eyes. The right one was dilated.

Her heart is slowing. I need your blood to heal her, Iso said. I'll try not to take so much that you faint. I don't want to waste lifeforce consuming your blood using magic, so I'm going to consume it the old-fashioned way.

"Do whatever you must to help her," Frances said around the lump in her throat. Iso scurried across the bed and bit Frances's arm. The pain was a sharp shock. Frances sucked a breath through her teeth as her familiar drank. The pull of her blood made her lightheaded. She sat down on the bed beside the child, holding the girl's wound shut with her fingers, watching as Iso's scales brightened from a dull brick color to a fiery red.

When her familiar released her, Frances felt woozy. The floor spun, but with effort she was able to stay upright.

Iso lay across the child's stomach, and the scent of brimstone filled the air, the scent of dragon blood magic. *I'll heal her as best I can.*

Frances's fingers were shaky, but she felt confident she was still capable of stitching up the wound. To her relief, the injury finally began to clot. Magic warmed the damaged tissue, and the swelling receded.

"Iso?" Frances blinked down at the familiar, whose scales were turning paler by the second.

Her little head is very, very hurt, the dragon said. I can keep her heart beating, but she needs more magic. A lot more magic.

Frances offered her arm, the bite in her skin still glossy. “Take more of my blood, or I can call for Mary or—”

You’ve given what you can, and the servants can’t help. There’s hardly any magic in their mortal blood. Iso lifted her diamond-shaped head like it was heavy. *I think even if I drained you dry, it might not be enough. You’re only half-fae. And magic doesn’t work the same on humans. They’re resistant to it, and I’m a poor excuse for a dragon.*

“She’s not going to die!” Frances caught her lip between her teeth, knowing she needed to keep her wits to stitch the wound. The next fear that gnawed at her was that the child wouldn’t wake or that she wouldn’t be the same when she did, but she shoved those fears aside too. “We can do this, Iso. We can save her.”

Billie remained unconscious throughout the entirety of the suture, and that worried Frances greatly. As she rinsed the blood from her fingers, she noted that the child’s coloring had improved. Her skin was flushed. The paler Iso’s scales turned, the healthier Billie appeared.

Frances knew it the moment Jonas arrived at the manor.

Relief had her shoulders falling forward, her back loosening. The bond declared his presence louder than the servants who stirred back to life in the house, and there was movement and chatter once more. Heavy footsteps on the stairs stirred up the drumbeat of her heart.

Her mate didn’t bother to knock before he stepped inside. Jonas was soaked from head to boot.

“I came as quickly as I could,” he said, chest heaving. “I was already on the way after I received your letter, but the carriage got caught in the storm and had to take to shelter. Then I heard you.” He laid his palm over

his breast. “I felt you calling to me. I knew something was wrong, so I hoofed it!”

“You hoofed it,” Frances said weakly, her heart suddenly too big for her chest. She knew then what she’d only dared to suspect in the quietest parts of her mind.

She loved this man.

Loved all of him, every inch, all of his multitudes. The sarcastic trickster and the dependable husband who was always there, who *always* came when she called for him. A shiver went through her, and the dull persistent pain of her aching soul faded from her body. There was only the bond, one spirit reaching out for the other. She wanted to run to him.

She started to stand, felt woozy, and needed to sit back down again on the bed. The blood loss had taken quite a toll.

Jonas’s gaze found Billie wrapped in the blankets, and his eyes went big and round. Mary and Branson trailed the Lord of Whiteholm into the chamber, explaining to him in hushed voices the events as they had unfolded.

“Glasmorra was convinced we were trying to be rid of her,” Mary said, wringing her hands in her damp apron. “But of course we love her! It’s just a visit. Honest, we thought it’d be good for her.”

“Then I went and told her something I shouldn’t have,” Branson said sheepishly, “and little Glasmorra ran right into that damned storm and fell.”

“What’d you say?” Jonas demanded, scowling at the young human. Jonas’s clothing and hair dripped. The puddle forming on the carpet under his boots grew.

Branson looked like a man destined for a hanging. His already pale skin blanched. “She thinks the world of you, my lord, and I told her you didn’t like humans. It was a stupid thing to say, and I’m so sorry.”

Jonas’s face fell. “That one isn’t on you.” He turned back toward the bed, his hands flexing at his sides. His voice dropped so low Frances barely heard him. “That one is on me and my stupid loud mouth.”

Frances, Iso’s voice was so faint in her head that Frances started. She stood too quickly and nearly spilled to the floor, instantly dizzy with blood loss. The little dragon had drained herself so dry her body was thin, her scales snowy pale.

Iso, are you all right? Frances reached for her, and her scales were cold, her wings drooped like they were too heavy to keep tucked at her sides. Frances scooped her into her arms, wobbling on legs that felt like rubber. Jonas was behind her in a heartbeat, bracing her with an arm around her waist.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

The child is going to be all right now. Iso sounded like she was whispering from the end of a long tunnel.

Iso—

I gave her my essence, as much of it as she could take, to make her whole again . . . But I gave too much of it to make me whole again.

“No,” Frances moaned, squeezing her familiar to her chest. “No, no, what do you mean?” But she knew what she meant. Iso’s scales were so transparent, she could see something glowing inside her chest. It glittered like a diamond, shaped like a drop of water. It was the piece of soul Frances had formed from the tear she’d shed for the man she’d loved, the mate who was dying.

When I'm gone, take it back, Iso said. Take that piece of your soul back and be complete with your mate.

Frances's eyes welled over. "I didn't regret making you my familiar," she choked. "I still don't. I love you, Iso."

This life hasn't always been what I wanted it to be, the dragon said, her voice growing fainter, her body feeling lighter. But you were my favorite part of it. Don't be sad for me now. I have very, very big plans for the next life.

Frances buried her face in the dragon's neck and wept.

Chapter 17



Jonas

Jonas could tell by looking at the familiar that she was unwell. Her scales were fading fast. He laid a hand on her small head. Her body was cold to the touch, but small puffs of breath warmed his palm.

“Jonas,” Frances gasped, “she needs blood. Immortal blood is best. She’s . . .” She couldn’t say the word, but he didn’t need her to. He understood her time was limited. “She’s just a runt. She’s never had a lot of magic, and she’s given too much of herself to Billie to save her.”

He peeled off his damp jacket, letting it fall with a wet thwack to the floor, and he rolled up his sleeve. With nothing to cut himself with, he pressed the dragon’s sharp teeth to his forearm and broke the skin, but Iso’s mouth didn’t move. Her tongue lolled. Her breaths were shallow.

He took Iso in his arms and held her against his torn flesh, willing her to drink. His blood dripped into her mouth and down toward his wrist.

“She w-wants,” Frances sobbed, her nose turning red, “she w-wants us to take her to her hoard, to the conservatory. She wants to see it one last time.”

“I’ll keep watch over Billie,” Mary said sadly, sliding in beside Glasmorra, whose coloring had improved tremendously.

Frances clung to Jonas, steadying herself as they moved out into the hall. She made it halfway down the stairs before she needed to sit.

“I’ve lost too much blood.” She waved him on, dropping onto the step below. “Take her quickly. Take her before she . . .” Her chin trembled. “I’ll come as soon as my head stops spinning.”

Jonas cradled the little dragon as he hurried down the stairs, hefting her toward the conservatory.

“Drink,” he whispered. “Iso, I see you, dragon. I see you, daughter of the divines. Drink,” he begged her. “What’s this nonsense about you being a runt? I see no runt. I see a *dragon*. You are mighty, Iso. Live.”

This honorable creature had just given her lifeforce to a precious child, and her sacrifice moved him deeply. His eyes stung.

“Live,” he begged the dragon.

Jonas shouldered through the conservatory doors, surprised at the jungle of wilted flowers before him. The earthen floor was dry and cracked, spotted in toads that scrambled away from him.

“Please live,” he told her, certain that his words had fallen on ears that could no longer hear. She’d gone very still in the crook of his arm. Her breath no longer puffed against his skin.

Jonas laid her down on a rich patch of soil between the two water gardens. He ran a hand tenderly across her wings, then he turned for the entrance, intent on retrieving his wife. She would want to say goodbye properly. He would carry her here if need be.

But when he reached the stained-glass doors, they wouldn’t open. He tugged on them, and they didn’t budge. What had been light and easy to push apart was now as heavy as concrete. The scent of brimstone burned in his nose.

“Iso,” he said, over his shoulder, “did you just lock me in here?”

The little dragon lifted her head, surrounded by flowers that bloomed anew as her scales darkened from pink to rosebud red. She flicked her tongue at him mischievously.

* * *

Jonas’s wife spent forty-five minutes trying to convince Iso that she couldn’t keep him in her hoard. He stood near the doors, waiting on them to open, his cut dripping blood into the soil. With each drop, the soil darkened and the smell of brimstone strengthened.

Perhaps his eyes were deceiving him, but the conservatory seemed to grow in size incrementally.

“Of course I’m glad you’re not dead, Iso, and I already know you’re a mighty dragon,” Frances said, her voice muffled by the doors. “I made you promise not to trap the servants in there because—yes, *technically* Jonas isn’t a servant, but you can’t keep my husband in your hoard. You simply cannot. He’s mine.”

Jonas wanted to add something to the conversation which to him seemed entirely one-sided, but when he’d tried before it appeared to agitate the familiar, so he kept quiet.

“This is no way to thank him for saving your life with his blood,” Frances said.

The doors parted then, and his wife scrambled inside. She grabbed him by the damp lapel of his waistcoat and jerked him over the threshold. “Quickly, before she changes her mind!”

Jonas lunged into the corridor, eyeing the doors behind him with suspicion. He made a mental note *never* to walk through them again. “She’s your familiar. Doesn’t she have to do what you say?”

“That wasn’t part of the bargain we made. We’re just companions,” Frances explained, leaning most of her weight against his arm as they walked. “And as she says, she’s a dragon. A dragon who really likes handsome men. She can’t be expected to just let them come and go as they please. It goes against all of her instincts.”

His lips quirked. “Are you well?”

“A little lightheaded still, but it’s getting better.”

She was also wet and cold and her dress was in ribbons, he noted. Her cheek was bruised, the pink of her skin splotched with red and purple. They were both in need of dry clothes. When Carrot found them in the corridor, Jonas ordered that clothing be gathered for him and hot tea sent up to Frances’s bedroom.

Frances insisted that they be informed the moment Dr. Bandile arrived with Mr. Archer to look over Billie.

As midnight neared, the rain lightened considerably. It misted against the windows of Frances’s chambers. Starlight and one small candle flickering on the vanity lit the room in a soft amber glow.

“Turn around,” he told her.

The bond thrummed in his chest beside his heart as she obliged him. His eager fingers went to her hair, gently working free the pins. When her curls were down, she relaxed against him briefly. He held her there, easing the lingering tension from her with his steady presence until she was limp.

He started on the braids next, unweaving them. Her hair cascaded down her spine, the ends sweeping across the top of her bottom. He

brushed the tresses over one shoulder. She helped gather it up, twining the strands into one thick braid as he loosened the fastenings of her dress. Ripped satin pooled at her feet, settling quietly around her boots and stockings. She reached for her garters.

“Don’t you dare take this from me,” he rumbled at her.

She lifted her arms in surrender, her quiet laughter playful and surprised.

When her corset was undone, he sat on the bench at her vanity and patted his knee. She put her boot in his lap. He removed her filthy shoes one at a time, then the garters, working her stockings down her legs.

His hands skimmed up her thighs, tugging on the ends of her drawers. Their eyes met.

“Go on,” she invited. He stripped her bare, her chemise too. Afterward, she stood before him, hands cupping her breasts, allowing him to look. He consumed her with his gaze: her flush pink complexion, her generous curves, her soft belly and ample thighs. Gently he laid his hand over her stomach, spreading his fingers across the subtle skin, thanking the gods that she was all his and no one else’s. Then he kissed her stomach, just under her breasts.

“It’s an absolute travesty that you ever wear clothes,” he said against her flesh, “but let’s get you dressed.”

The bond enjoyed wrapping her back up almost as much as stripping her bare. Jonas strongly disagreed with his instincts on that point, but he participated wholeheartedly regardless. She undressed him next, her fingers lingering around the dips and valleys of his chest and stomach, exploring him.

A knock at the door preceded the footman, Carrot, informing them that the doctor had finally arrived.

Wrapped in silk robes and carrying spare blankets, they went to meet the physician in the master's bedroom.

* * *

As Dr. Bandile looked the child over, Jonas hovered, concerned by every expression the physician made. He asked the good doctor question after question, to which the physician consistently answered politely, despite it being the middle of the night for the older human. When the doctor frowned in concentration, Jonas's pulse spiked. When the doctor pursed his lips contemplatively, Jonas's stomach dropped.

Glasmorra awoke fully during the physician's perusal, and relief shot through Jonas. Frances, Mary, and the Archer brothers gave a little collective cheer. Then a subsequent whoop of excitement sounded amongst the staff gathered in the hall. The child had stirred multiple times, Mary had said, but she wasn't able to get her to interact with her much before she was out again.

The girl was groggy, but she answered the doctor's questions with clarity, exploring the bandage wrapped around her skull from ear to ear with tentative touches.

Frances sat in an armchair at Glasmorra's bedside, a blanket around her shoulders, a steaming cup of tea in her hands. Jonas stood just in front of her, keeping as close as the bond craved.

"You're certain the danger has passed, but how can we be sure you're right?" Jonas demanded. Frances reached out and took his hand, squeezing

his fingers firmly. He felt the gentle admonishment in the gesture. “I mean, I’m certain you know best. I just want to know what to watch for.”

“Fever is my biggest worry. She needs to keep that knee straight while it heals, and she needs to rest. Lots and lots of rest. Doctor’s orders.” Dr. Bandile lifted the bandage around Billie’s head, examining the wound for the third time. He squinted over at Frances. “You’re sure you performed this suture *tonight*?”

Frances nodded. “Just hours ago.”

“If I had to guess, I’d have thought this injury was at least two weeks old,” Dr. Bandile said. “Probably longer.”

Frances explained her familiar’s part in the healing. The physician seemed interested rather than uncomfortable with the use of blood magic.

“In that case,” Dr. Bandile said, “I very much doubt she’ll become ill. Fever usually sets in after the first couple of days. If it’s this far along in the process I’m confident she’ll be all right.”

“I’m so glad to have you here,” Frances said to her mentor, “but this is not the way I envisioned seeing you again.”

“But it is good to see you all the same, my friend.” Dr. Bandile hugged her in a fatherly fashion that stirred up Jonas’s bonding barbarian instincts only a little. He bit his tongue to keep from grumbling.

They shared a pot of tea together before the doctor left.

For the rest of the night, Billie was never alone. Frances and Jonas took every meal with her. Jonas entertained her with stories about the elves and the nature goddess Glasmorra. The child was restless, but she obeyed when he told her she wasn’t to leave the bed.

Cat was brought in to entertain her. The feline had been disgruntled indeed after Jonas left her behind in the carriage during the storm, but she

cheered at being reunited with the girl, curling up in her lap for pets, tail flicking pleasantly through the air.

When the first signs of sunrise dawned, it was Mary who suggested they let the girl try to sleep. Jonas asked to have a moment alone with her first. The servants filtered out. Frances was the last to leave, a secret smile curving her mouth as she closed the door behind her.

Jonas sidled up next to the bed, feeling like a child himself about to get a well-earned scolding. It struck him as funny that he was intimidated by such a little person so much weaker than he was, but there he stood, palms clammy.

Cat hissed at him. Apparently, she still hadn't forgiven him.

"Am I in trouble?" Billie croaked.

"You're not. I am," he soothed.

Jonas handed her the glass of water left for her on the end table, and she drank from it. Then she offered some to Cat, who poked her snowy face inside and drank as well.

Jonas linked his hands in front of him, preparing to give the speech he'd been practicing in his head most of the night, still just as nervous as a schoolboy. "You heard some things that I need to apologize for. First, let me be clear: this house will always be your home. Inside these walls you will want for nothing. If the things Branson said about me not liking humans made you worry that your time here is limited, rest assured that is not the case. I'm sorry you heard all that about me."

She replaced the water glass on the end table, then squinted at him.

Jonas turned up the lantern beside her bed so her mortal eyes could see him better. "I've been unfair to humans for some time now. They are clever and inventive and resourceful, and as you've proven tonight, they

possess an inner strength that is far greater than anything an immortal like me possesses.”

“But I didn’t run away because Branson said you don’t like humans.” She blinked big indigo eyes, appearing smaller than ever wrapped in billowy bedding, swallowed up by the master bed. “I ran away when he said you’d never be my father because you don’t like humans.”

“Father?” A breathy burst of surprised laughter shook out of him. “Why would you even want such a thing?”

She shrugged her slender shoulders, shifting the blankets. “My father doesn’t come around, but you’ve been around loads of times,” she said. Cat nuzzled under Glasmorra’s chin, and the child wound her fingers through her fuzzy white tail. “And I like you.”

“Sweetling,” Jonas said, his heart twisting into knots, “you’re right. Your father doesn’t deserve his title. He’s made no efforts to know you, and that will forever be his greatest failing as a person. I like you very much, and I’m honored that you would even consider thinking of me that way. However, I’m also certain I’m equally undeserving.”

His own father had been lousy at the job, which meant that he had no idea how to do such a thing well, and Glasmorra needed better than him. She needed—deserved—the very best.

Her brows pinched together. “Why?”

Jonas cleared his throat. “Because I haven’t been the kindest or the best sort of person, and you should have the best there is.”

“You haven’t been nice to humans,” she guessed.

All of his relationships had had an expiration period because he was the wicked Bargainer. One day she’d learn fully of his extortion and grifting and regret her youthful wish. And even if she’d learn to forgive

him for that, their relationship was doomed to come to an end much sooner than he would ever want it to. She was mortal and he was not.

He would lose her one day even if he was the very best father.

He hung his head, ashamed in her innocent presence once again. “I haven’t really been very nice to anyone.”

“Is it because I have spots and you don’t?” she asked, pointing to the smattering of freckles on her nose. “Is that why you can’t be my dad?”

“Not at all. You have lovely spots.”

“Would you be my father if I had horns and brown skin and—”

“It isn’t that, Glas. You and I are exactly the same where it matters most,” he said, pointing to her heart.

“You mean in our guts and stuff?”

Jonas chuckled. “Yes, in our guts and stuff. Now, rest up, little one, and know that you are safe and loved and you aren’t going anywhere. You’re home.”

Not wanting to disturb either of her injuries, he kissed the top of her hand. Cat allowed him to scratch behind her ears with tolerant disinterest before he dimmed the lantern and slunk from the room.

* * *

That morning, Jonas was put up in the guest chambers at the end of the hall. He was tired, but his eyes refused to stay shut. He found himself staring at the tin ceiling tiles, studying the filigree swirls stamped on each, too wound up to find rest.

Apparently, he wasn’t the only one. Long after the house fell quiet, he heard the gentle padding of immortal footsteps out in the hall. Humans

tended to walk more heavily most of the time. The bond hummed in his chest at her nearness, confirming his suspicions, but she didn't open the door. Frances walked to it, stood outside for a time, then her footsteps retreated.

Several minutes later, she was back again. Jonas sat up, suppressing laughter, wondering if she'd ever gather up the courage to open it, wondering if he should help her by saying something.

He decided to wait.

Frances didn't disappoint him. After one more lap up and down the hall, the door creaked open.

She peeked inside, her braid a cascade of woven ebony over her shoulder. "Oh? You're awake."

"I am," he said, amusement in his voice.

A light blush stained her cheeks as she entered, closing the door softly behind her. "Have you been awake this whole time?"

He grinned. "The whole entire time."

She wrung her fingers together in front of her dressing gown. "I didn't want to wake you—well, no, I did want to wake you, but I couldn't decide if I *should* wake you."

Jonas crooked his finger at her, and she padded closer. "It was a very long night, but you're always welcome in my room, whichever room I happen to be in."

She stared down at the knot she'd made of her fingers, more bashful than he'd ever seen her. Her throat bobbed. "It's just that, since I was in your bed that first time, mine feels cold and lumpy and lonely."

"Ah, that is a problem," he cooed, lifting the edge of the blankets in welcome. "I think maybe you like snuggling, too."

“I think I do.” She un-cinched her robe and let it drop from around her. Then she slid in next to him, turning on her side, arm tucked under the pillow he gave her.

“Your secret is safe with me.” He molded himself to her, pressing his chest against her back, slinging an arm around her waist. “Is this all right? Does the crack in your soul mind?”

“It’s being very, very quiet, and I think I know why,” she whispered.

“Why?” he matched her volume.

“Because I love you.”

The words hit Jonas with the force of a tidal wave. He blinked at the back of her lovely head, his tongue tied.

She continued to fill the silence. “I know you wanted to burn our agreement, but then you went and wrote those lovely addendums. I don’t know if I can now.” At his continued silence, he felt her body tense. “Are you going to say something?” she squeaked.

“Sorry—yes,” he gasped, finding his words. “I’m pleased, of course, just very surprised. Here I was, thinking I would need to trick you into loving me with great grand gestures and by spoiling you absolutely rotten. What an easy mark you are.”

Frances turned in his arms to face him, her weight shifting the mattress. “Why would you need to trick me?” she asked, chortling.

“I’m the wicked Bargainer.” He caught her hand and kissed her palm, then held it to his cheek. “I’m undeserving of your love, and if you haven’t noticed that yet, then you’re quite the easy mark indeed.”

“I’ve felt that same worry myself, unworthiness.” The emeralds in her eyes glittered in the starlight, a hypnotizing shimmer. “I felt I was undeserving because my soul is broken. But I’ve come to realize that it

isn't about what we deserve, and it's got nothing to do with how strong our mate instincts are. Love is about being there."

"Being there," he said contemplatively. He certainly liked it when Frances was wherever he was.

She ran her thumb over his jaw. He needed a shave, but she didn't seem to mind. "Being there for each other like you were here tonight, hoofing it on foot through a storm to get to me. Like you're always there when I need you. I can be there for you even if my soul is broken. And you can do that for me even if you're wicked sometimes."

He laid his brow against hers, a fae gesture of great affection. "Are you afraid?" he asked, because he certainly was.

"Terrified," she breathed, the comforting warmth of her exhale brushed his face, and Jonas sighed contentedly because this was yet another thing they were in together, another murky maze of emotions that didn't feel nearly so overwhelming with her beside him. "You make me want to be brave, Jonas. And it's a fair trade, my love for yours."

"Oh no, I don't do fair trades," he teased, linking his fingers through hers. "I'll only allow this because my heart profits so greatly from the exchange. Now, go to sleep, my love, and dream of me."

He pulled her into his body, soaking in the warmth of her skin and the gentle vibration of their bond through his pulse.

* * *

Jonas awoke with his wife kissing his chest, her hand inside his breeches, cupping his balls. He let out a groan of pleasure before he grabbed her by her braid and pulled her mouth to his. The bond thrummed in his chest, but

it was secondary to the thrill firing his blood, burning away the last of the sleep that clouded his thoughts.

This precious woman loved him, a truth he could get intoxicated on.

He laid her on her back and glided between her spread thighs. She'd already undone the lacing of his pants, so he freed himself easily. With the head of his cock, he found the split in her drawers. Her body was wet and warm and ready for him, an enticement that sent shockwaves through his nerve endings.

Her nightdress posed a challenge, so he tore it. "I'll buy you another one," he vowed. When her drawers became uncooperative, he ripped those too. "I'll buy you another one of those as well."

Her husky laughter was music to him.

Jonas teased her with his kisses and tongue, licking her breasts until she was writhing and begging, the noises shooting down his spine, building the pressure in his balls.

He pushed inside her slowly. "Do you feel me?" Her eyes rolled back, and her moan was her answer. "Do you feel how much I love you?"

"Yes!" Her hips rolled up to meet his. "I feel you."

"Bliss," he breathed, "you taste and smell and feel like fucking bliss to me."

He could hear how wet she was when they came together. He claimed her slowly, and in return felt wholly claimed and consumed by her, by the pricks of her nails all over his back and arms, by her whimpers and moans, by the breaths they shared, and the frantic drumbeat of their hearts.

As he increased his pace, she held his face in her hands, staring into his eyes with dreamy wonder. "I'm here with you," she said. "Always."

They found their release together and slept wrapped around one another.

Chapter 18



Dear Husband,

You've received a formal invitation to an event hosted by The Diamond Scar for interested applicants. I've left the details for you on your desk, and I've already taken the liberty of accepting on your behalf. If you'd like, there's time to have special formalwear tailored for you based on your measurements from the wedding.

Glasmorra is healing well, though she is not a fan of having to walk with a crutch for another couple of weeks. I've had to scold her a few times for trying to leave it behind. Cook's joints are bothering her, so I've added an extra day off to her schedule. The others have grumbled a bit about it, but I think when they're her age, they'll be grateful for the policy.

I slept in your bed last night. Turns out it's just as cold and lonely and lumpy as mine when you're not in it. Hurry home.

All my love,

Frances

Dear Wife,

Please have Mr. Archer cancel my reservation for the event. I've recently had cause to visit The Diamond Scar and found it incredibly underwhelming. I have much more pressing things to do now with my time than spend any of it in a smoky club with stodgy peers.

I want to help convince Glas to use that crutch a bit longer. And someone needs to find out more about this possible suitor for Mary I heard the Archer brothers whispering about last week. We should look into this young man and make sure he's worthy of her, don't you agree?

Most importantly, I'd rather be at home, warming my wife and smoothing the lumps out of her bed. See you this evening.

With all that I am,

Jonas

* * *

Jonas

Jonas walked to Dimmet Street under a cloudy night sky, using the shortcuts he knew well, protected from dangers by his fierce guard-cat who hissed a warning at everything that moved. She was in very good spirits with a hot eel in her belly.

Jonas was in similar good spirits, the close of a bargain imminent.

He entered the small pawnshop that was now his once more, a copy of the sale tucked in the lapel of his jacket signed by Lord Thorvald, though

he doubted he'd need it. Leif, the pawnbroker, didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Let me guess," Leif grunted, his fox tail bristling behind him, "you're here to announce you'll be raising my rent or evicting me shortly if I don't give you the pearls?"

"All of those things if you don't *sell* me the pearls. I didn't come here to rob you. I'll even have them for a fair price," Jonas said. Leif opened his mouth, but Jonas cut him off. "That price had better not include marrying your sister. I'm very much spoken for."

Leif glared at him for a moment. Then he grabbed the pearls off the counter behind him. "One gold crescent."

"That is a fair price," Jonas said approvingly, laying the coin out on the counter between them.

"Really is a shame." Leif dropped the string of pearls down beside the coin. "I was hoping to milk one more outing out of Lord Freest."

"Take it from me," Jonas said, reaching for the necklace, "Lord Freest is not a man worth getting a woman's hopes up over. He's the worst sort of dandy, and he'll only disappoint your sister."

"Ha. Don't I know it? She does, too." Leif smirked, showing off a row of white teeth with overly sharp canines. "The only interest my sister has in him is his inability to keep a watchful eye on his full coin purse."

Jonas's brows rose toward his hairline. "Is that so?" He laid another gold crescent on top of the first and pushed the pearls back toward the pawnbroker. "How's about you get your sister one more outing with him, then? Afterward, you can have the necklace sent by courier to Whiteholm."

Leif's returning grin was wolfish. "That's agreeable," he said, scooping the coins directly into his pocket.

* * *

Jonas arrived at Whiteholm late that night, around teatime for those who kept to a Lunar schedule. As he entered the main house, he felt Frances's stress in a prickling sensation in his chest. He ignored the match Mr. Archer attempted to hand him for the altar. Ambling out of the foyer, he took the stairs two at a time, already as anxious as his mate.

He sensed her down the corridor on the second floor, in the nursery—the nursery that no one used.

Except now his mate was there accompanied by two sleeping bundles snoozing inside their respective cradles. Frances hovered over the farthest infant human, knotting her hands in her skirts.

"What's this?" he whispered.

Frances made a shooshing gesture at him, then waved him in closer.

Jonas wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be closer. Tiny humans intimidated him. They were loud and messy, and he had no idea what to do with them. Just as he had no idea why two mystery babies were now in his house.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he entered cautiously to stand beside his distressed mate.

"Mr. Archer's niece had twin boys. Their father died, and now their mother is in need of a new job and more family support," Frances explained in hushed tones. "The staff has been taking turns on their days off, helping to care for them while their mother gets acclimated."

“That’s very kind of them, but—” A foul smell emanating from the nearest infant cut him off. He pinched his nose shut. “But why are *you* here?” he hissed.

“Because Mary looked exhausted,” she hissed back, “and I thought she deserved a break.”

“And because you’re their grandmother,” he grunted. Then he coughed because, even through his closed nostrils, his keen senses could taste the foulness floating in the air like a green cloud.

She sighed. “They were sleeping so peacefully, I thought it wouldn’t be hard at all. Only now something rotten is coming out of this one, and although I think I understand what to do for him, I can’t stop thinking about the time I was a fledgling fae and I accidentally squeezed a frog too hard.”

“You’re a nurse.”

“Not that sort of nurse!”

The other baby began to cry. Frances made soft shushing noises that seemed to agitate the infant further. The baby’s features scrunched up and turned red. He screamed at the top of his lungs, fists bunched by his puckered face. His mate’s distress doubled, as did his.

He hurried to the cradle of the screaming bundle. Jonas stuck his finger shallowly inside the baby’s mouth. The infant’s eyes flew open as his tiny tongue investigated the pad of the foreign digit. Then the baby’s lips sealed around Jonas’s finger, the infant’s eyes slid shut, and he began to suckle.

“I’ve fixed this one!” he said victoriously, watching his wife over his shoulder. “You can do it. Just don’t think about frogs.”

“Oh,” she fussed, removing the baby’s swaddling like it was made of bubbles not permitted to burst. “Oh, oh.”

“Gods,” Jonas said, examining the scrawny baby limbs. “They do sort of resemble frog legs.”

“Not helping,” Frances sang in a soothing tone that was definitely not for his benefit.

The baby boy awoke as she changed him and smiled at her, his mouth big and toothless, and Frances cooed, her stress lessening incrementally through their bond. “Well now, that wasn’t so hard,” she told the baby. “And look, you still have all your arms and legs. Isn’t that nice!”

Mary entered. “My lord, my lady,” she said politely. “I hope they weren’t too much trouble.”

“Of course not,” Frances said, crossing to Jonas.

“Liar,” he muttered under his breath. He for one had been forever traumatized by the experience, and he was half-certain she had, too. Frances threw an elbow into his side, knocking the wind out of him. He removed his finger from the baby’s mouth, and the infant wailed in protest.

Mary lifted up the baby boy, bouncing him in her arms, and he calmed in seconds. “This one is hungry. Better get him to his mother.”

One-handed, the housekeeper scooped up his brother, balancing them both with expertise. Jonas appreciated her skills now more than ever before, having been forced into infant caregiving under duress for ten whole minutes.

When Mary was gone, Frances threw herself at Jonas, drooping against him, her cheek resting on his chest. “Gods, that was terrible.”

He patted her back. “Agreed.”

Frances closed her eyes, her forehead wrinkling. “I can hear my father’s disapproval in my head, lecturing me about boundaries and about what my responsibilities as an employer are, my place as a lady, but . . .” She exhaled and opened her eyes, fixing him with a pleading look. “I want to hire a governess for Glasmorra and a nurse for those babies.”

“Hire them,” Jonas said. “If it means we’re never in that terrifying position ever again, hire them. What’s your father know anyway?” He smirked. “He’s only been a lord for a few centuries or so.”

* * *

As sunrise neared, Jonas went in search of a snack. He found a basket of apples in the kitchen and frowned. Each of them had a single small bite mark dug out of the fruit.

Carrying the apples in the crook of his arms, Jonas found the little culprit in the drawing room, her injured leg propped up beside her on the sofa, Cat in her lap. Frances sat in the nearby armchair knitting what looked like the sleeve of a sweater. She grinned when she saw him.

Jonas lifted the first of the fruits, showcasing the small bite mark. “What was wrong with this one, Glas?” he asked.

She glanced at him, then resumed stroking Cat’s back, her lip in her teeth.

“Glas?” Jonas prompted.

The girl swallowed, and her lashes lowered. “If I promise not to take bites of any more apples, would you let me call you Father?”

The apples spilled from his arms, thudding against the rug like heavy drops of rain. Jonas looked to his wife, who had lowered her knitting over

her lap, appearing as shocked speechless as he felt.

He'd thought the girl's first mention of him as father had been impulsive, caused by a desire to escape a fate she didn't want. Yet, here she was, weeks later, still wanting that thing he didn't deserve.

His eyes drifted back to his mate once more. Her gaze was growing just as watery as his own. Her words about love equaling dependability had rooted itself deeply inside him, forever changing his understanding of the emotion.

"It would be the honor of my life to have you call me Father, regardless of whether or not you eat another apple," he said around the feelings fisting in his throat.

Frances rubbed her nose, her eyes red and welling.

"I won't always get it right," he warned, "but I can vow that I'll always be there for you, Glas."

He would outlive this child, but that was right and good, because it was his job as Father to be there when she needed him, not the other way around, he'd realized. His immortality meant that he could do that for her *always*. That alone, if for no other reason, made him fit for the task, whatever his reputation, whatever his past, regardless of his worth.

"If you'll have me, I'll be your father," Jonas choked.

"Course I'll have you," Glas said, her brow furrowing. "Didn't I already say that?"

He crossed to her, laughing. Bending over the back of the sofa, he hugged her tight. Her little hands pitter-patted against his shoulders comfortingly. Frances came to them as well, embracing them both.

"Why's everyone crying?" Glas asked.

Cat yowled, squeezing her way out from between them, appearing as confused by the display of emotion as the girl was.

* * *

The next night, just before sunrise, Jonas joined his wife in the drawing room. She was already seated in her favorite armchair, spectacles balanced on her nose, working on the sweater she was knitting him.

If arthritis hadn't been an entirely human disease, he would suspect he now had it. He fell into the seat beside her with a grunt, his hips and back throbbing.

Frances peered at him over her spectacles, her lips in a droll twist. "I heard you were very busy being the Lord of Whiteholm tonight."

He grunted at her grumpily. He'd been attempting to prove a point that he was capable of being a proper employer with boundaries. But then he'd spent most of the night hunched over bushes picking raspberries with Cook after she commented casually that it was lonely work. After that, he rode horses for hours, exercising them. The groom needed a hand, and he'd given Carrot the night off so he could go pursue a girl in the village he'd heard him and his brother whispering about.

"I'm a shit lord," he said.

Frances chuckled. "You're not as bad as all that."

"I'm not a lord at all," he grumbled. "I'm their grandfather."

Laughter rumbled out of his mate, the sound as soothing to his soul as a warm hug. "Welcome to the club, my darling. It wasn't the one you had in mind when we started our bargain, but it's a good one nonetheless."

"Where's our child?" he asked.

She beamed at him. “Which one?”

“Stop that.” He nudged her arm, and a snort of sardonic laughter slipped out of her. “The little one.”

Frances unspooled more yarn, then picked up her needles and resumed knitting. “Glas is playing on the lawn with Cat. Don’t worry. Branson’s watching her to make sure she uses her crutch.”

“Good.”

Mr. Archer entered the room, carrying a slender package wrapped in brown parchment and a rolled-up newspaper, his stern face resembling a worn antique. “I apologize that this is getting to you so late, my lord.”

“Not your fault, Mr. Archer. You don’t control the post,” he said, accepting the package and the paper on his lap. “It’s a strange hour for a delivery, though.”

Mr. Archer nodded solemnly. “After the courier was let inside, he was supposed to wait by the doors, but he went wandering. The chap ended up in the conservatory.”

Frances attempted to hide her giggles as a cough.

“I see,” Jonas said, unfolding the paper, eyes scanning for the article he wanted. “Well, I wager he won’t dare go wandering next time.”

“He was in the dragon’s hoard for more than 12 hours, my lord,” Mr. Archer droned. “I would feel some pity for him if I didn’t suspect he had sticky fingers and was looking around for something worthwhile to pocket.”

“Thank you, Mr. Archer,” Frances said.

The butler bowed his head and let himself out of the room.

Jonas couldn’t see his wife around the unfolded paper, but he heard it when she stopped clacking her needles together, her next inhale sharp and

full of surprise.

Frances shoved down the top of the paper, hazel eyes wide. “Lord Braker arrested for heading an illegal gambling ring?”

Jonas turned the paper over, scanning it. That was the article he’d been looking for.

“Jonas,” she said, wonder in her voice, “did you have something to do with that? Did you *ruin* Lord Braker?”

“Of course I did,” he said, straightening the paper. “Lord Braker made my wife cry.”

Frances sat there beside him in contemplative silence.

Jonas bounced his knee, rattling the wrapped box on his lap. “You still haven’t asked me what’s inside this.”

“Gods,” she whispered, still overtaken by the news.

Her shock amused him. Surely by now she understood how much she meant to him, the great lengths he would go to to please her, to avenge her?

To love her.

In case that wasn’t clear, he ripped open the parchment and handed the box to her, certain that the gift would speak much louder than his words. There was a note inside on a scrap of paper.

The dandy’s purse is empty. My sister’s purse is bursting – Leif

“What’s that mean?” Frances asked.

Jonas wadded up the note and slipped it into his pocket. “I’ll explain later. Open the box.”

He watched his wife’s face, amused by the wrinkle in her brow. Her little gasp as she pulled the lid off the box was gratifying. She dropped her knitting and set aside her spectacles.

Frances dove into his lap, hugging his chest. “Oh, Jonas, you found it!”

He helped string the pearls around her neck, fastening them behind her. “If in your shocked state, you’re thinking thoughts about how magnificent and heroic I am, I’d appreciate it if you started thinking them out loud. I had to undergo the most grueling of trials to find and secure that necklace for you.”

Frances sniggered. “What sort of trial?”

He frowned. “I had to make a *fair* trade.”

“No extortion? No grifting? No tricks at all?”

“None. It was dreadful.”

Laughing, her fingers found the charm at her throat, squeezing it like it had always been there. “Magnificent and heroic indeed. Thank you, my love.”

Her lip trembled. She bit down on it hard.

“You’re trying not to cry, aren’t you?” Amusement flavored his words.

“If I say yes,” she squeaked, “are you going to ruin the delivery man who brought it here and caused my tears?”

“I’ll have to consider it,” he said, chuckling.

“The onions bought from the grocer the other day made me cry a little,” she said playfully. “Are you going to ruin the grocer?”

“A definite possibility.” He pressed his lips to hers, feeling one of her tears slide down her cheek and onto his. It occurred to him in that moment that he would share her tears always. Her pain. Her laughter. Her happiness. It was his too. Forever.

All of his relationships had expiration dates, but this one never would. This one was for keeps.

Epilogue



Frances

One Year Later . . .

During the midnight meal, Frances broke up the bread at the table into smaller chunks. She held up a piece for her husband, and he ate it out of her palm. The bond enjoyed when she fed him, and over time it had become a habit to simply share a plate.

But then Jonas surprised her, maneuvering something sharp and shiny into his hand.

Frances blinked at him. “Did you just pull a tiny sword out of your filthy boot?”

“It’s called a dagger.” He lifted the table knife, speaking with his mouth full. “This dull poker isn’t going to get the job done. Cook’s roast is tough tonight.”

Her nose wrinkled. “You can’t just pull tools from your boot. Boots are dirty. That’s disgusting, and I’m eating this, too.”

He waved her words off. “It’s fine. It’s got a little sheath and—”

Frances stuck her hand under his nose, flexing her fingers. “Give me the tiny sword, Jonas.”

“No!” he growled. “It’s my tiny sword.” *Frustrating woman!*

Through the link of their souls, Frances felt the words shot at her like an arrow. Their connection sunk into place and warmed. The drumbeat pumped, no longer beside her heart, but in it and through it.

Jonas felt it too, she knew. He dropped the dagger and the table knife. They clattered against the plate.

Frances's eyes went wide. "Did you just . . . did we just . . ." *Did I just think my words at you?*

Dumbstruck, he nodded.

Oh, my gods. I did it. I bonded. I'm your true mate. I DID IT.

I think we did it. The two of us. Group effort—

Frances threw her arms around his neck and squealed in his ear. "Oh, this is wonderful . . . Is it strange that we finally bonded while we were arguing with each other?"

Jonas shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm often fonder of you after we've been shouting at each other."

"I can't believe I did it!" she cheered, leaping from her chair to throw her arms around his neck. He looked like he was about to correct her again, but she kissed him soundly. "Oh, you sweet, irritating, barbaric man," she cooed, squeezing him tight.

Jonas smiled smugly. "Keep kissing me like that, and I really will let you have all the credit."

She kept kissing him like that until he was witless.

The End

* * *

Wait! There's more. Don't miss *Mated to the Mad Marquess*.